

**FEE**

# LIBERTY TO LEARN

**WHY CHILDREN NEED  
SELF-DIRECTED  
EDUCATION**

KERRY McDONALD



# **Liberty to Learn**

## **Why Children Need Self-Directed Education**

KERRY McDONALD

**FEE**

FEE's mission is to inspire, educate, and connect future leaders with the economic, ethical, and legal principles of a free society.

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# Introduction

For most of human history, until quite recently, education and schooling were separate and distinct. When the Pilgrims arrived on the shores of the New World in 1620, searching for personal liberty and freedom of expression, the expectation for educating children was firmly rooted in the family. It remained there for over two hundred years, even as an informal network of public and private schools sprouted to offer education in classrooms for those parents who chose it. Parents remained squarely responsible for the education of their children, whether at home, in schools, through apprenticeships, or all three.

It wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that this all changed. With the onset of compulsory schooling statutes that mandated attendance in schools, education gradually became synonymous with schooling. Parents, particularly immigrant parents who threatened the dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant cultural norms of the time, lost power and autonomy. Their children were increasingly educated in "common school" classrooms, and attempts to create an alternative schooling system, such as Catholic parochial schools, were hotly criticized and contested. Homeschooling became an option mostly for the elites, like Horace Mann, the influential common school reformer who is credited with passing the nation's first compulsory schooling law in Massachusetts in 1852. Mann's wife homeschooled their three children.

Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, and for much of the 20th century, children and adolescents spent increasingly longer portions of their days and years in mass schooling. Homeschooling fell out of favor, even among the elites, and public schools vastly eclipsed private schools in terms of enrollment. The high school was invented, and kindergartens were incorporated into primary schools. The rise of mass schooling led to a growing separation of children from their families and their broader communities. Most of their childhood and adolescence were spent in school.

In the 1960s and '70s, parents began to take back control of their children's education. Liberals and conservatives alike removed their children from public schools to homeschool them, and led an effort to make homeschooling legally recognized in all 50 states by 1993. At the same time, some parents and educators embraced the idea of "unschooling," or Self-Directed Education, that further sought to separate education from schooling—including school-at-home. These unschoolers blurred the lines between formal notions of learning and a

more authentic, personalized approach to education focused on individual autonomy and real-life immersion in the broader community. As we nestle into the 21st century, with its vast technological infrastructure and unprecedented pace of innovation, the principles of unschooling have never been more relevant or essential—both for individuals and for society.

This collection of FEE.org articles digs deeper into the fascinating evolution of education in America, from its family-centered origins to the rise of compulsory schooling, and the gradual separation of education from schooling over the last 50 years. The anthology is divided into three sections. The first part describes the history and impact of compulsory schooling on education in the U.S., including modern efforts to break its stranglehold with education choice mechanisms and free market principles. The second section explores the rise of the contemporary homeschooling movement, including the ongoing challenges homeschooling parents face from government overreach. The final section elaborates on the ideals and practices of unschooling and Self-Directed Education, which place learners in charge of their own education, following their own distinct passions, while supported and nurtured by their families and communities.

Many of these articles are presented in the first-person as I share my perspectives as an unschooling mom to four never-been-schooled children, while others reflect broader research and trends exposed through my ongoing work as an education policy writer. I hope you will find this blend of policy and practice, of ideas and implementation valuable as you trace the past, present, and future of compulsory schooling, homeschooling, and unschooling.

# **Compulsory Schooling**



# Compulsory Schooling Is Incompatible with Freedom

If we care about freedom, we should reject compulsory schooling. A relic of 19th-century industrial America, compulsory schooling statutes reduced the broad and noble goal of an educated citizenry into a one-size-fits-all system of state-controlled mass schooling that persists today.

Horace Mann, the designer of the nation's first compulsory schooling law in Massachusetts in 1852, saw taxpayer-funded, universal compulsory schooling as a way to mold children into moral, democratic citizens. He famously said: "Men are cast-iron, but children are wax."

Despite the fact that he homeschooled his own children, Mann built the Prussian-inspired foundation for the modern government schooling apparatus, cementing education's enduring association with schooling. His biographer, Jonathan Messerli, [writes](#) of Mann: "That in enlarging the European concept of schooling, he might narrow the real parameters of education by enclosing it within the four walls of the public school classroom."[\[1\]](#)

## Founding Father of Forced Education

For Mann and his colleagues, compulsory schooling represented a dramatic leap from the Founding Fathers who influenced their vision. Thomas Jefferson, for example, recognized the essential connection between education and freedom, [writing](#) in 1816: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."[\[2\]](#)

Jefferson supported a decentralized framework of education, free to the poor; but, unlike Mann, he recognized that making such a system compulsory and government-controlled would be a threat to liberty. Jefferson [wrote](#) in 1817: "It is better to tolerate the rare instance of a parent refusing to let his child be educated, than to shock the common feelings and ideas by the forcible asportation and education of the infant against the will of the father."[\[3\]](#)

Despite Jefferson's warnings, compulsory schooling laws were enacted and expanded during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mandating school attendance under a legal threat of force. Some 20th century education philosophers and social reformers, like John Dewey, aimed to lessen the impact of forced schooling, striving to make classrooms and curricula more relevant to children's experiences and more hands-on and experimental.

What these well-meaning reformers often ignored, however, was the inherent conflict between freedom and compulsion in mass schooling. One cannot be truly free within a mandatory, coercive system of social control.

In 1964, just over a century after the initial onset of state-controlled compulsory schooling, Paul Goodman wrote his scathing treatise, [Compulsory Mis-education](#), describing the key failures of compulsory schooling. He wrote that “education must be voluntary rather than compulsory, for no growth to freedom occurs except by intrinsic motivation. Therefore the educational opportunities must be various and variously administered. We must diminish rather than expand the present monolithic school system.”[\[4\]](#)

Even as social reformers ranging from A.S. Neill (*Summerhill*, 1960) to [John Holt](#) (*How Children Fail*, 1964; *How Children Learn*, 1967) to Ivan Illich (*Deschooling Society*, 1970) wrote about the serious problems with forced schooling, compulsory education laws tightened and expanded worldwide in the latter half of the 20th century.

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and ratified later by all UN member nations except for the United States) [asserts](#): “The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory.” According to the U.N. every child has a right to a forced education, mandated by law and compelled by the state.[\[5\]](#)

## **Empowering Parents**

Today, as compulsory schooling consumes more of a child’s life than ever before, beginning in toddlerhood and extending into late-adolescence for much of each day and year, many parents and educators are recognizing the disconnect between forced schooling and freedom. Increasingly, they are choosing—or creating—alternatives to school.

A rising number of “free schools” and Sudbury-type [democratic schools](#), like those promoted by A.S. Neill, are opening nationwide, enabling young people to direct their own education free from coercion. Homeschooling is [booming](#), and the philosophy of unschooling, or [self-directed education](#), advocated by John Holt and others is [growing](#) in popularity and influence. Lawmakers in some states are urging a [repeal](#) of antiquated compulsory schooling laws, and are re-empowering parents with more education choice measures.

These are promising signals of a [quiet exodus from mass schooling](#), as

more people realize that freedom and compulsion make strange bedfellows.

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[1] Messerli, Jonathan. 1972. *Horace Mann: A Biography*. New York: Knopf.

[2] Jefferson, Thomas. Extract from a letter from Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey in *Quotes by and about Thomas Jefferson*. Jan. 6, 1816.

[3] Jefferson, Thomas. 1904. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Vol. 17. Issued under the auspices of the Jefferson Memorial. Washington, D.C. p. 423.

[4] Goodman, Paul. 1966. *Community Mis-Education and the Community of Scholars*. New York: Random House.

[5] United Nations Human Rights. (1959). Declaration of the Rights of the Child. "Principle 7" [online] Available at:  
<https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/1959-Declaration-of-the-Rights-of-the-Child.pdf>

## Milton Friedman Was Right to Call Them “Government Schools”

Milton Friedman was the 1976 Nobel-prize winning economist who promoted free-market ideals and limited government. [The Economist](#) called him “the most influential economist of the second half of the 20th century. . . possibly of all of it.”[\[1\]](#)

He died in 2006, but one of his lasting legacies is [EdChoice](#), formerly the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, the organization Friedman and his economist wife, Rose Director Friedman, founded in 1996. The non-profit strives to “advance educational freedom and choice for all as a pathway to successful lives and a stronger society.”

It was fitting that on his birthday in 2017, Mr. Friedman was mentioned in *The New York Times*; but it wasn’t to offer birthday wishes. Instead, an opinion [article](#) written by journalist Katherine Stewart, author of *The Good News Club: The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children*, criticizes Friedman and his current education choice followers.

### Friedman’s Take

Stewart alludes to Friedman’s influential 1955 [paper](#) advocating education choice and school vouchers for parents. In that paper, Friedman offers the foundation for modern school choice theory. He begins with a statement as true today as it was then:

The current pause, perhaps reversal, in the trend toward collectivism offers an opportunity to reexamine the existing activities of government and to make a fresh assessment of the activities that are and those that are not justified.[\[2\]](#)

Friedman goes on to advocate for the “denationalization of education” through choice and vouchers. He writes:

Given, as at present, that parents can send their children to government schools without special payment, very few can or will send them to other schools unless they too are subsidized.

Parochial schools are at a disadvantage in not getting any of the public funds devoted to education; but they have the compensating advantage of being run by institutions that are willing to subsidize them and can raise funds to do so, whereas there are few other sources of subsidies for schools. Let the subsidy be made available to parents regardless where they send their children—provided only that it be to schools that satisfy specified minimum standards—and a wide variety of schools will spring up to meet the demand. Parents could express their views about schools directly, by withdrawing their children from one school and sending them to another, to a much greater extent than is now possible.[\[3\]](#)

### **“Government Schools”**

In her op-ed, entitled “What ‘Government School’ Means,” Stewart writes at length about the term “government schools,” a phrase Friedman used and that many of us use today to describe compulsory, taxpayer-funded, government-controlled schooling. She argues that referring to public schools as “government schools” is rooted in a racist past of “American slavery, Jim Crow-era segregation, anti-Catholic sentiment and a particular form of Christian fundamentalism,” and she attacks the marriage of those advocating economic and religious freedom. Stewart writes:

Many of Friedman’s successors in the libertarian tradition have forgotten or distanced themselves from the midcentury moment when they formed common cause with the Christian right.[\[4\]](#)

In its modern usage, as well as Friedman’s use of the term, the phrase “government schooling” is often used to draw attention to increasing federal and state control of education, and the corresponding weakening of parental influence and choice. For instance, in his 1991 *Wall Street Journal* [op-ed](#), former New York State Teacher of the Year, John Taylor Gatto, writes:

Government schooling is the most radical adventure in history. It kills the family by monopolizing the best times of childhood and by teaching disrespect for home and parents.[\[5\]](#)

In her article, Stewart links compulsory government schooling with democracy; She concludes:

When these people talk about “government schools,” they want you to think of an alien force, and not an expression of democratic purpose. And when they say “freedom,” they mean freedom from democracy itself.[\[6\]](#)

But for Friedman and his current school choice followers, freedom from a government-controlled, compulsory institution is a fully democratic expression that widens opportunity and expands liberty. School choice beyond government schools also frees many young people from what can be an oppressive childhood mandate.

### **Facilitating Freedom with School Choice**

As a teacher for 30 years, Gatto saw first-hand the harm that compulsory government schooling can cause. In his *Wall Street Journal* article he writes:

“Good schools don’t need more money or a longer year; they need real free-market choices, variety that speaks to every need and runs risks. We don’t need a national curriculum or national testing either. Both initiatives arise from ignorance of how people learn or deliberate indifference to it. I can’t teach this way any longer. If you hear of a job where I don’t have to hurt kids to make a living, let me know.”[\[7\]](#)

School choice measures can promote freedom and opportunity, and reduce harm to children. They can also help to limit the role of government while augmenting the role of parents and educators.[\[8\]](#)

Friedman concludes his 1955 paper describing how school choice measures can facilitate freedom. He states that these measures would lead to “a sizable reduction in the direct activities of government, yet a great widening in the educational opportunities open to our children. They would bring a healthy increase in the variety of educational institutions available and in competition among them. Private initiative and enterprise would quicken the pace of progress in this area as it has in so many others. Government would serve its proper function of improving the operation of the invisible hand without substituting the dead hand of bureaucracy.”

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[1] No Author. 2006. "Milton Friedman: An Enduring Legacy." *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/news/2006/11/17/an-enduring-legacy>

[2] Friedman, Milton. 1955. "The Role of Government in Education." *Economics and the Public Interest*, ed. Robert A. Solo. Reprinted online with permission from Rutgers University Press. <http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/330T/350kPEEFriedmanRoleOfGovttable.pdf>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Stewart, Katherine. 2017. "What the 'Government Schools' Critics Really Mean." *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/31/opinion/donald-trump-school-choice-criticism.html>

[5] Gatto, John Taylor. 1991. "I quit, I think." *Education Revolution*. Reprinted 2011. <http://www.educationrevolution.org/blog/i-quit-i-think/>

[6] Stewart, 2017.

[7] Gatto, 1991.

[8] For more information on vouchers, see my 2018 article, "School Vouchers Give Parents More Choice in Education." *Foundation for Economic Education*. <https://fee.org/articles/school-vouchers-give-parents-more-choice-in-education/>

## The Devastating Rise of Mass Schooling

For generations, children learned in their homes, from their parents, and throughout their communities. Children were vital contributors to a homestead, becoming involved in household chores and rhythms from very early ages. They learned important, practical skills by observing and imitating their parents and neighbors—and by engaging in hands-on apprenticeships as teens—and they learned literacy and numeracy around the fireside.

In fact, the literacy rate in Massachusetts in 1850 (just two years prior to the passage of the country's first compulsory school attendance law there) was 97 percent.<sup>[1]</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the Massachusetts adult [literacy rate](#) in 2003 was only 90%.

In advocating for compulsory schooling statutes, Horace Mann and his 19th century education reform colleagues were deeply fearful of parental authority—particularly as the population became more diverse and, in Massachusetts as elsewhere, Irish Catholic immigrants challenged existing cultural and religious norms. “Those now pouring in upon us, in masses of thousands upon thousands, are wholly of another kind in morals and intellect,” mourned the Massachusetts state legislature regarding the new Boston Irish immigrants.<sup>[2]</sup>

In his book, [Horace Mann's Troubling Legacy](#), University of Vermont professor, Bob Pepperman Taylor, elaborates further on the 19th-century distrust of parents, particularly immigrant parents, and its role in catalyzing compulsory schooling. Pepperman Taylor explains that “the group receiving the greatest scolding from Mann is parents themselves. He questions the competence of a great many parents, but even worse is what he takes to be the perverse moral education provided to children by their corrupt parents.”<sup>[3]</sup> Forced schooling was then intended as an antidote to those “corrupt parents,” but not, presumably, for morally superior parents like Mann, who continued to homeschool his own three children with no intention of sending them to the common schools he mandated for others. As Mann's biographer, Jonathan Messerli [writes](#):

From a hundred platforms, Mann had lectured that the need for better schools was predicated upon the assumption that parents could no longer be entrusted to perform their traditional roles in moral training and that a more systematic approach within the public school was necessary. Now as a father, he fell back on the



educational responsibilities of the family, hoping to make the fireside achieve for his own son what he wanted the schools to accomplish for others.[\[4\]](#)

As mass schooling has expanded over the past 165 years, parental empowerment has declined precipitously. Institutions have steadily replaced parents, with alarming consequences. Children are swept into the mass schooling system at ever-earlier ages, most recently with the expansion of government-funded preschool and early intervention programs. Most young people spend the majority of their days away from their families and in increasingly restrictive, test-driven schooling environments. It is becoming more widely acknowledged that these institutional environments are damaging many children. Boston College psychology professor, Dr. Peter Gray, [writes](#):

School is a place where children are compelled to be and where their freedom is greatly restricted—far more restricted than most adults would tolerate in their workplaces. In recent decades, we have been compelling our children to spend ever more time in this kind of setting, and there is strong evidence (summarized in my recent book [*Free To Learn*]) that this is causing serious psychological damage to many of them.[\[5\]](#)

For teenagers, the impact of mass schooling can be even more severe. Largely cut off from the authentic adult world in which they are designed to interact, many adolescents rebel with maladaptive behaviors ranging from anger and angst to substance abuse and suicide. As Dr. Robert Epstein writes in his book, [\*The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen\*](#):

Driven by evolutionary imperatives established thousands of years ago, the main need a teenager has is to become productive and independent. After puberty, if we pretend our teens are still children, we will be unable to meet their most fundamental needs, and we will cause some teens great distress.[\[6\]](#)

It is time to hand the reins of education back to parents and once again prioritize authentic learning over mass schooling. Parents know best. They should be able to choose freely from a wide variety of innovative, agile education options, rather than rely on a one-size-fits-all mass schooling model.

By positioning parents to take back control of their children's education—to reclaim their rightful place as experts on their own children—we can foster more education options and better outcomes for children and society.

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[1] Total Massachusetts [population](#) in 1850 was 994,514; total [illiteracy rate](#) in Massachusetts in 1850 was 28,345.

[2] Peterson, Paul E. 2010. *Saving Schools: From Horace Mann to Virtual Learning*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, p. 26.

[3] Pepperman Taylor, Bob. 2010. *Horace Mann's Troubling Legacy: The Education of Democratic Citizens*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas.

[4] Messerli, Jonathan. 1972. *Horace Mann: A Biography*. New York: Knopf.

[5] Gray, Peter. 2013. "School Is a Prison—And Damaging our Kids." *Salon*. [https://www.salon.com/2013/08/26/school\\_is\\_a\\_prison\\_and\\_damaging\\_our\\_kids](https://www.salon.com/2013/08/26/school_is_a_prison_and_damaging_our_kids).

[6] Epstein, Robert. 2007. *The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen*. California: Quill Driver Books/Word Dancer Press, Inc.

# How Schooling Crushes Creativity

In 2006, educator and author Ken Robinson gave a TED Talk called, “[Do Schools Kill Creativity?](#)” At over 50 million views, it remains the most viewed talk in TED’s history.

Robinson’s premise is simple: our current education system strips young people of their natural creativity and curiosity by shaping them into a one-dimensional academic mold. This mold may work for some of us, particularly, as he states, if we want to become university professors; but for many of us, our innate abilities and sprouting passions are at best ignored and at worst destroyed by modern schooling.

In his TED Talk, Robinson concludes:

I believe our only hope for the future is to adopt a new conception of human ecology, one in which we start to reconstitute our conception of the richness of human capacity. Our education system has mined our minds in the way that we strip-mine the earth: for a particular commodity. And for the future, it won’t serve us. We have to rethink the fundamental principles on which we’re educating our children.[\[1\]](#)

## Education by Force

Robinson echoes the concerns of many educators who believe that our current forced schooling model erodes children’s vibrant creativity and forces them to suppress their self-educative instincts. In his book, [Free To Learn](#), Boston College psychology professor, Dr. Peter Gray, writes:

In the name of education, we have increasingly deprived children of the time and freedom they need to educate themselves through their own means. . . We have created a world in which children must suppress their natural instincts to take charge of their own education and, instead, mindlessly follow paths to nowhere laid out for them by adults. We have created a world that is literally driving many young people crazy and leaving many others unable to develop the confidence and

skills required for adult responsibility.[\[2\]](#)

Compelling research shows that when children are allowed to learn naturally, without top-down instruction and coercion, the learning is deeper and much more creative than when children are passively taught. University of California at Berkeley professor Alison Gopnik finds in her [studies](#) with four-year-olds, as well as similar [studies](#) out of MIT, that self-directed learning—not forced instruction—elevates both learning outcomes and creativity.

Gopnik’s research involved young children learning how to manipulate a specific toy that would make certain sounds or exhibit certain features in certain sequences. She found that when children were directly taught how to use the toy they were able to replicate the results and quickly get to the “right answer” on their own by loosely mimicking what the teacher demonstrated.

But when the children were instead allowed to learn without direct instruction—to play with the toy, explore its features, and discover its capabilities on their own—they were able to get to the “right answer” in fewer steps than the taught children. The self-directed children also revealed other parts of the toy that could do interesting things—which the taught children did not discover.

Gopnik summarizes this research in her Slate [article](#), stating:

Perhaps direct instruction can help children learn specific facts and skills, but what about curiosity and creativity—abilities that are even more important for learning in the long run? . . . While learning from a teacher may help children get to a specific answer more quickly, it also makes them less likely to discover new information about a problem and to create a new and unexpected solution.[\[3\]](#)

## **Learning Not Schooling**

Conformity may have been the social and economic goal of the 19th-century architects of the top-down, compulsory schooling model, but the 21st-century economy demands creativity. We now need a learning model of education, rather than a schooling one.

As former Google CEO Eric Schmidt [stated](#), “every two days we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003.”[\[4\]](#) It is

impossible to think that an archaic, industrial model of forced schooling can keep pace with a new, technologically-enabled, information-saturated economy that requires agility, inventiveness, collaboration, and continuous knowledge-sharing. A truly transformative 21st-century education model will cultivate, rather than crush, human creativity.

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[1] Robinson, Ken. 2006. “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” Filmed February 2006 at TED2006, 19:22. [https://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity](https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity).

[2] Gray, Peter. 2013. *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*. New York: Basic Books.

[3] Gopnik, Alison. 2011. “Why Preschool Shouldn’t Be Like School.” *Slate*. [http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2011/03/why\\_preschool\\_shouldn\\_t\\_be\\_like\\_school.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2011/03/why_preschool_shouldn_t_be_like_school.html)

[4] Siegler, M.G. 2010. “Eric Schmidt: Every 2 Days We Create As Much Information As We Did Up To 2003.” *Tech Crunch*. <https://techcrunch.com/2010/08/04/schmidt-data/>

# Factory-Like Schools Are the Child Labor Crisis of Today

Most American children and teenagers wake early, maybe gulp down a quick breakfast, and get transported quickly to the building where they will then spend the majority of their day being told what to do, what to think, how to act. An increasing number of these young people will spend their entire day in this building, making a seamless transition from the school day to afterschool programming, emerging into the darkness of dinnertime. For others, there are structured after-school activities, followed by hours of tedious homework. Maybe, if they're lucky, they'll get to play a video game before bed—a rare moment when they are in control.

There is mounting evidence that increasingly restrictive schooling, quickly consuming the majority of childhood, is damaging children. Rates of childhood anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, and other mental illness are [surging](#). Teenage suicide [rates](#) have doubled for girls since 2007, and have increased 30 percent for teenage boys. [Eleven](#) percent of children are now diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and [three-quarters](#) of them are placed on potent psychotropic medications for what Boston College psychology professor Dr. Peter Gray [describes](#) as a “failure to adapt to the conditions of standard schooling.” Dr. Gray goes on to explain:

It is not natural for children (or anyone else, for that matter) to spend so much time sitting, so much time ignoring their own real questions and interests, so much time doing precisely what they are told to do. We humans are highly adaptable, but we are not infinitely adaptable. It is possible to push an environment so far out of the bounds of normality that many of our members just can't abide by it, and that is what we have done with schools.[\[1\]](#)

In the early twentieth century, concern about children's welfare in oppressive factories was a primary catalyst for enacting child labor laws and simultaneously tightening compulsory schooling laws. Yet, for many of today's children, the time they spend in forced schooling environments is both cruel and hazardous to their health. Gone are the oppressive factories, but in their place are

oppressive schools. Where is the outrage?

In a *New York Times* Op-Ed article, author Malcolm Harris posits that young people are placed into these high-pressure, increasingly competitive schooling environments by corporate interests aiming to push job training to younger ages without having to pay for it. He [writes](#):

There are some winners, but the real champions are the corporate owners: They get their pick from all the qualified applicants, and the oversupply of human capital keeps labor costs down. Competition between workers means lower wages for them and higher profits for their bosses: The more teenagers who learn to code, the cheaper one is.[\[2\]](#)

Harris's solution is to encourage students to unite collectively, following a labor union paradigm, to demand better schooling conditions. He asserts:

Unions aren't just good for wage workers. Students can use collective bargaining, too. The idea of organizing student labor when even auto factory workers are having trouble holding onto their unions may sound outlandish, but young people have been at the forefront of conflicts over police brutality, immigrant rights and sexual violence. In terms of politics, they are as tightly clustered as just about any demographic in America. They are an important social force in this country, one we need right now.[\[3\]](#)

While Harris and I agree that the conditions of forced schooling are untenable and rapidly worsening, we disagree on the solution. To suggest that students unionize to demand better compulsory schooling conditions is similar to suggesting that prisoners unionize to demand better prisons: It's a fine idea but it's completely futile. Children are mandated under a legal threat of force to attend compulsory schools.

The first step to addressing the oppressiveness of forced schooling and its harmful effects on children is to fight the compulsion. Rather than trying to improve the conditions of an inherently unjust, state-controlled system, the system itself must be overturned. After all, humans cannot be truly free when they are methodically, and legally, stripped of their freedom under the pretense that it's good for all.

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[1] Gray, Peter. 2010. "ADHD & School: Assessing Normalcy in an Abnormal Environment." *Psychology Today*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201007/adhd-school-assessing-normalcy-in-abnormal-environment>

[2] Harris, Malcolm. 2017. "Competition Is Ruining Childhood. The Kids Should Fight Back." *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/06/opinion/students-competition-unions-bargaining.html>

[3] Ibid.



## **Teens Need Less Schooling and More Apprenticeships**

Apprenticeships first appeared in the later Middle Ages as an opportunity for young people, usually between the ages of 10 and 15, to gain practical skills and on-the-job training from a master craftsman. These adolescent apprentices came of age immersed in authentic experiences and surrounded by adult mentors.

The term “adolescence” comes from the 15th century Latin word, “adolescere,” meaning “to grow up or to grow into maturity.” But it wasn’t until 1904 that G. Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association, coined the term “adolescence” to identify a separate and distinct phase of human development. The expansion of compulsory schooling statutes, particularly for teenagers, as well as new child labor laws, artificially extended childhood and gave rise to the “typical teenager” stereotype that persists today.

### **Teenagers Are More Capable than We Allow**

Adolescence became a social construct. Most of the research into adolescence, often viewed in pathological terms, began in the 1940s. Removed from genuine, real-life experiences and confined to a restrictive, artificial mass schooling environment, it is no wonder that adolescents often respond with apathy, angst, and anger. But this is not how teenagers have historically behaved, nor how they behave today in many parts of the world.

As psychologist Dr. Robert Epstein, author of [\*The Case Against Adolescence\*](#), [writes](#):

The social-emotional turmoil experienced by many young people in the United States is entirely a creation of modern culture. We produce such turmoil by infantilizing our young and isolating them from adults. Modern schooling and restrictions on youth labor are remnants of the Industrial Revolution that are no longer appropriate for today’s world; the exploitative factories are long gone, and we have the ability now to provide mass education on an individual basis. Teenagers are inherently capable young adults; to undo the damage we have done, we need to establish competency-based systems that give these young people opportunities and incentives to join the adult

world as rapidly as possible.[\[1\]](#)

Apprenticeships can be a valuable, time-tested approach to connect adolescents with the authentic, practical experiences of the adult world. High school-age young people crave real, meaningful experiences that can lead to useful skills and hands-on knowledge. Expanding apprenticeship programs to adolescents can not only address socially-constructed teenage turmoil, but also create a critical pathway for career success and personal fulfillment.

### **Integration through Apprenticeships**

Critics may argue that apprenticeships and vocational education create a “two-tiered” system, in which more advantaged young people take an academic path while less privileged kids get left behind. In the preface of his book, [\*The Means to Grow Up: Reinventing Apprenticeship as a Developmental Support in Adolescence\*](#), Dr. Robert Halpern disagrees. He writes that “youth apprenticeship experiences set the foundation for and in some instances actually create more nuanced and grounded post-secondary pathways for many youth, across social class. What might at first glance seem a strategy for reproducing inequality—an academic pathway and extended adolescence for the most advantaged youth, a more vocational pathway and a push into the adult world for the less advantaged—is one means for addressing it.”[\[2\]](#)

Apprenticeship programs are a win-win for both apprentices and the employers who hire and train them. Adolescents gain beneficial abilities and connection to the authentic, adult world, while employers generate a pipeline of skilled workers. Teenagers are not innately troubled. The key is to support their natural development by removing them from restrictive, artificial institutional environments while reintroducing relevant pathways toward adulthood.

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[\[1\]](#) Epstein, Robert. 2007. *The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen*. California: Quill Driver Books/Word Dancer Press, Inc.

[\[2\]](#) Halpern, Robert. 2009. *The Means to Grow Up: Reinventing Apprenticeship as a Developmental Support in Adolescence*. New York: Routledge.

## Education Needs to Be Uber-ized

Uber revolutionized transportation. Airbnb transformed the lodging and short-term rental space. Netflix was pathbreaking in the field of on-demand entertainment. In all of these instances, innovative, agile ideas competed against existing, outdated models. And they won.

I feel bad for the taxi drivers who spent a lot of money for a regulated, now near-worthless medallion, but I honestly can't remember the last time I called a cab. And the popularity of Uber has led to other competitors entering the space, so if you don't like Uber and its practices, Lyft and other ride-sharing companies are quickly gaining market share. [Disruptive innovations](#) may initially cause some challenges as a market gets re-calibrated, norms get re-shuffled, and workers get re-trained, but more choice and more variety, at different price points and with different levels of service, are generally better for patrons.

The true genius of these three examples of innovations that completely altered their industries is that they did so by simply bypassing the existing, rigid model and going direct-to-consumer—giving end-users a service that was leaps-and-bounds better than the status quo. They also leveraged best available technology to transform their respective fields. I think the same disruptive innovation could work in education, as new, agile learning models gradually grow and replace existing, obsolete conventional schooling. After all, taxis are still available for those who want them, but there are now many other choices.

### The Ubers of Education

The possibilities for education without conventional schooling are almost limitless, and we are already seeing many of these models gain popularity and presence. [Khan Academy](#) has become a household name for free, high-quality, on-demand, online learning. Khan is joined by other, free online learning platforms, such as [Duolingo](#), [Coursera](#), [HarvardX](#), and [MIT OpenCourseWare](#)—to name just a few. YouTube makes learning easy and interesting, whether I am trying to learn how to properly chop celeriac, or my 6-year-old daughter is learning how to preserve and pin the bugs she collects, or my 8-year-old son is learning his latest skateboarding tricks.

In fact, on that last example, a recent *Forbes* [article](#) on the future of learning describes why it was that skateboarders got so good in the mid-1980s. It

turns out, that was the first time skateboarding sports videos became widely available—using new VCR technology—and quickly improved skateboarders’ skills. *Forbes* contributor, John Greathouse, [writes](#):

In the same way action sports videos rapidly accelerated the skill level of millions of participants, augmented and virtual reality will also propel the dissemination of practical, tactile skills across the globe.[\[1\]](#)

The future of learning, interwoven with cutting-edge technology, will also very likely include innovative learning spaces that encourage individuality and invention. Unlike conventional schools, new learning spaces will place less emphasis on order and more on originality, less on conformity and more on creativity.

## **The Makerspace Model**

We already see the seeds of these conventional schooling alternatives in self-directed [learning centers](#) around the country. In Boston, [Parts & Crafts](#) combines elements of a makerspace and self-directed learning center to create an entirely non-coercive, technology-enabled learning environment for young people choosing to learn without school. The makerspace model is likely to be an enormous catalyst in shaping the new ways in which people, young and old, learn through their community and throughout their lifetime.

Makerspaces and hackerspaces are popping up most rapidly and accessibly in libraries across the country. As an [article](#) in the Atlantic explains:

“Makerspaces are part of libraries’ expanded mission to be places where people can not only consume knowledge, but create new knowledge.” And therein lies the startling difference between education of the past and of the future: conventional schooling forces learners to consume knowledge, whereas the future of education empowers learners—of all ages and stages—to create knowledge.[\[2\]](#)

Just as Uber helped to give riders faster, better service at lower costs than traditional taxis, the disruptive education models of the future will be better and cheaper—and much more relevant—than conventional schooling. These new

learning models will revolutionize the education field through choice, technology, and empowerment.

The future is here.

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[1] Greathouse, John. 2017. “The Future of Learning: Why Skateboarders Suddenly Became Crazy Good in the Mid-80s.” *Forbes*.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/johngreathouse/2017/02/25/the-future-of-learning-why-skateboarders-suddenly-became-crazy-good-in-the-mid-90s/>

[2] Fallows, Deborah. 2016. “How Libraries Are Becoming Modern Makerspaces.” *The Atlantic*.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/03/everyone-is-a-maker/473286/>

# Homeschooling

## It's a Great Time to Be a Homeschooler

Homeschoolers are a diverse bunch. Our teaching approaches and learning philosophies vary. Our politics run the gamut and our visions of education reform differ greatly. Yet, despite these contrasts, homeschoolers are remarkably similar. I recently asked a large, eclectic group of homeschooling parents why they chose this education option for their children. Key homeschooling features like “freedom,” and “time,” and “flexibility,” and “individualization” were common drivers for all.

When I first heard about homeschooling, it was 1998. I was a senior in college writing a research paper on education choice and the rising homeschooling movement, and became fascinated by this option. A college classmate of mine connected me with her family members who were homeschooling, and they invited me into their home to observe and ask questions. Of course my first question was: “What about socialization?”

I remember the mom’s calm and eloquent response, pointing out the obvious difference between being social and being socialized. She described their vibrant and engaging homeschooling networks, community involvement, and neighborhood activism. She explained that much of the socialization that happens in schools is not positive and can lead to malevolent behaviors, like cliques, and bullying, and unhealthy competition. Her homeschooled daughter graciously played her violin during my visit, and was one of the most curious, articulate, and polite young children I had ever met. I was hooked.

Later, I went on to graduate school in education policy at Harvard and became more committed to the ideas of education choice and innovation and alternatives to school. Now, as a homeschooling mom to four, never-been-schooled children, I combine policy and practice on a daily basis, watching the extraordinary ways in which my children learn without school.

According to U.S. Department of Education [data](#), the number of homeschooled children doubled between 1999 and 2012 to approximately 1.7 million children, or 3.4 percent of the overall school-age population. (As a [comparison](#), about 4.5 million children are enrolled in U.S. K-12 private schools.) “Concern about the school environment, such as safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure” remains a top driver for homeschooling families, with 34 percent of 2016 Department of Education survey respondents indicating that it was the most important reason in their decision to homeschool.

## 2017 Homeschooling Report

A 2017 report by [The Pioneer Institute](#), a Boston-based public policy think tank, sheds light on the rapid growth and diversity of the U.S. homeschooling population. Co-authored by William Heuer and William Donovan, the comprehensive white paper explains that despite a paucity of support from government officials—and outright opposition by the nation’s largest teachers’ union—homeschooling has gained in both popularity and reach over the past several decades.

The report highlights that “there is no typical homeschooler or homeschooling family,” as the “one size fits all” prototype of conventional public schools does not apply to homeschooling families who tailor their educational approach to the needs and values of their family and their children. The report states:

Homeschooling is a viable alternative for the many students and their families who wish to opt out of traditional public schools. Regardless of a family’s rationale for homeschooling, the universal tenet of homeschoolers is the importance of parental choice and the conviction that parents are best equipped to make the educational decisions that affect their children.[\[1\]](#)

In tracing the history of 19th century compulsory schooling laws to the modern education choice movement, the report reminds us that Horace Mann, the proclaimed “father of American public education” who passed the nation’s first compulsory schooling statute in Massachusetts in 1852, homeschooled his own three children with no intention of sending them to the common schools he mandated for others.

The report says about Mann:

This hypocrisy of maintaining parental choice for himself while advocating a system of public education for others seems eerily similar to the mindset that is so common today: Many people of means who can choose to live in districts with better schools or opt for private schools resist giving educational choices to those less fortunate.[\[2\]](#)



## **Demographics and Costs**

As the fastest-growing alternative educational option, increasing at a rate of 3 percent per year, homeschooling continues its ascent into the mainstream with families choosing to homeschool for a variety of reasons, from a clear lifestyle choice to a lack of quality alternative education options.

Despite their disparate philosophies on how and why they homeschool, the Pioneer report finds that homeschooling families “have been united in their belief that parental choice in deciding to homeschool and the manner in which their children are educated is an intrinsic right, one which should not be usurped by the state. . . They also hold to the belief that the overall environment of traditional public school systems is not conducive to the educational goals they have for their offspring.”[\[3\]](#)

Legal throughout the United States, homeschooling represents a diverse cross-section of the American population. Demographically, Hispanics now comprise 15 percent of the homeschooling population, and black homeschooling families represent 8 percent—a number the Pioneer report cites as doubling in the 2007-2011 timeframe. Highlighting NCES data, the report reveals that 16 percent of homeschooling parents are educating a child with a physical or mental health issue, and more than 15 percent have a child with “other special needs.”

### **Homeschooling as an incubator for education innovation**

The geographic, demographic, and ideological diversity of the expanding homeschooling population is leading to many pathways of educational and pedagogical innovation. For homeschooling families, education choice starts at home; but as incubators of new methods and approaches to teaching and learning, their choice can have a widespread, positive impact on education innovation nationwide.

A lot has changed for homeschooling and education freedom since the late 90s. While I still get asked that knee-jerk question about socialization that I so naïvely asked years ago, I find it happens less often. Many people know homeschoolers, and some have even considered the approach themselves. Homeschooling networks are diverse, active, and far-reaching, connecting homeschoolers to each other and their community’s resources in myriad ways. Organizations and businesses, museums and libraries, nature centers and community colleges recognize homeschooling’s popular rise and offer classes

and resources to meet different needs and interests. Online learning resources allow for easy, on-demand access to a range of topics and subjects. Facilitating learning and pursuing knowledge has never been easier or more accessible. It's a great time to be a homeschooler!

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[1] No Author. 2017. "Study: States Should Provide Parents With More Information About Homeschooling Options." Pioneer Institute. <http://pioneerinstitute.org/featured/study-states-provide-parents-information-homeschooling-options/>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

## So, You're Thinking about Homeschooling. . .

I have been getting emails like the one below more frequently lately, so I thought I would share my general response:

Dear Kerry: I ran across your website while doing research on homeschooling. I am a mother of 3 children ages 6, 4 and 2. We moved to the suburbs when my children were smaller to take advantage of the top-rated public schools in our town. We had a wonderful pre-school experience due to the choice of school focused on play, outdoor exploration and emotional development.

However, as my 6 year old embarks on her education in the public school system, I find myself becoming more and more disappointed. More importantly, I find her becoming bored and disinterested in learning as a 1st grader.

All of this said, I am contacting you because I am thinking of homeschooling and I'm scared to death! What are the resources? What curriculum should I use? Where do I begin? So many questions! Help!

Hello and welcome to the exciting world of learning without schooling! You have already taken the important first step in redefining your child's education by acknowledging the limitations of mass schooling, recognizing the ways it can dull a child's curiosity and exuberance, and seeking alternatives to school. Now it's time to take a deep breath, exhale, and explore.

**1. First things first: Connect with your local homeschooling network.** This network could be a message board through a Yahoo or MeetUp group, or a Facebook group, or a local or national homeschooling advocacy group. Maybe you have already joined the [Alliance for Self-Directed Education](#) and have connected with the local SDE groups that may be forming in your area. Tapping into your local homeschooling community, posting your questions and introducing yourself, can be incredibly valuable. You may be surprised at just

how many homeschooling families are nearby and the many activities and resources available to you. You may also find families on a similar path as yours. This can alleviate much of the anxiety you are experiencing as you take a peek into this new world of learning. These local networks can help you to navigate your local homeschooling regulations and guide you through the process of pulling your child from school.

**2. Second: start reading!** Obviously, you are already doing this or you wouldn't have found my blog, but there is much more to learn. Homeschooling and education blogs and websites are great resources. Here is my short list of favorite books/articles/films to get you started:

[\*Free To Learn\*](#), by Peter Gray

[\*Teach Your Own\*](#), by John Holt (Anything by John Holt is worth reading. Here is the [Holt/Growing Without Schooling](#) website.)

[\*Life Learning Magazine\*](#), by Wendy Priesnitz (editor)

[\*Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling\*](#), by John Taylor Gatto

[\*Free-Range Learning\*](#), by Laura Grace Weldon

[\*Home Grown\*](#), by Ben Hewitt

[\*The Teenage Liberation Handbook\*](#), by Grace Llewellyn

[\*The Unschooling Handbook\*](#), by Mary Griffith

[\*The Unschooling Unmanual\*](#), by Jan Hunt

[\*Deschooling Society\*](#), by Ivan Illich

[\*Free To Live\*](#), by Pam Laricchia

[\*Class Dismissed\*](#) documentary

[\*Schooling the World\*](#) documentary

**3. Third: What about curriculum?** Personally, I am an advocate for [Self-Directed Education](#) (SDE). Sometimes referred to as “unschooling,” SDE shifts our view of education from schooling (something someone does to someone else, often by force) toward learning (something humans naturally do). With Self-Directed Education, young people are in charge of their own learning and doing, following their own interests and passions, with grown-ups available to help connect them to the vast resources of both real and digital communities. Children direct their education, adults facilitate.

I am a realist, though. (Or at least I try to be!) So I know that it is often challenging for families to go directly from a schooled mindset to an unschooled

one. Whenever parents ask me what curriculum they should choose, I say \*if\* you are going to use a curriculum, I recommend [Oak Meadow](#). A Vermont-based company that incorporates a lot of Waldorf-inspired educational ideas, Oak Meadow is a gentle, rich curriculum with a stellar reputation.

**4. Next: think about your family values, needs, and rhythms.** Shifting from schooling to learning may involve some big changes to your family life, your routines, and your schedules. It may lead to reassessing priorities and to carefully juggling multiple work and family responsibilities. It also means you need some help to avoid burning out! Consider your support network of family, friends, and community and get the help you need to make this work for the long-term. If there is a self-directed learning center or homeschooling co-op near you, these resources can also be incredibly helpful in enabling you to find balance and connection.

**5. Finally: talk with your kids!** Learning without schooling is a collaborative endeavor that is mostly focused on your child's distinct interests, learning styles, and needs. Talk with your child and find out what she wants to do. If you are coming directly out of a school environment, you may need some time to "deschool"—to fully embrace living and learning without being tied to the expectations and accouterments of a schooled lifestyle. Go to the library, the museum, the park, or the beach. Take a walk in the woods. Spend long, slow mornings reading books together on the couch. Bake cookies. Ride bikes. Write a letter to a friend. Watch a movie. Play Scrabble. Go to the grocery store, the bank, the post office. Live life. Soon you will see that living and learning are the same thing.

Best wishes to you as you embark on this exciting life journey! Remember: schooling is a relatively recent societal construct; learning is a natural condition of being human. Happy learning!

Warmly,  
Kerry

# There's a Due Process Problem with Homeschool Regulations

At [over](#) two million young people, the number of US homeschoolers is nearly comparable to the number of US students [enrolled](#) in public charter schools, and it is now considered a worthwhile education option for many families.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, a top [motivator](#) for homeschooling parents is “concern about the environment of other schools.” While their homeschooling approaches and educational philosophies vary widely, most homeschooling parents value the freedom, flexibility, and focus on family and community that a homeschooling lifestyle offers. In many ways, this freedom, flexibility, and family-centered learning are terrifying to the state. Despite the fact that homeschooling has been legally recognized in all 50 states since 1993, attempts to limit homeschooling freedoms are ongoing.

Recent efforts to tighten homeschooling regulations have been spotlighted in [New Hampshire](#) and [Iowa](#), and homeschoolers in the [United Kingdom](#) are now dealing with mounting pressure to make their homeschooling laws more restrictive.

An underlying theme in these calls for regulating homeschoolers is that parents can't be trusted and government knows best. Considering the fact that US students are [lagging](#) far behind their peers in other nations on international comparison tests, and the National Center for Education Statistics [reports](#) that only 14% of African-American eighth graders are proficient readers—while homeschooling students continue to [outrank](#) their schooled peers in academic performance—we should wonder who really knows best how to educate kids.

Homeschooling opponents will often cite rare examples of abuse or neglect of parents who claimed to be homeschooling, and who were often already known to social services agencies, as a rationale for restricting homeschoolers' freedoms. The vast majority of homeschooling parents are overly attentive to their children's education and well-being, which may be a primary reason they chose to homeschool in the first place. Sending their kids to school would be the easy path.

The biggest problem with the often-cavalier way citizens and lawmakers suggest regulating homeschoolers—who receive no public money but still pay local property taxes to fund schools—is that it is an invasion of privacy and a

violation of due process. It assumes parents must be monitored for the good of others, and that they are guilty unless proven otherwise. Deep down, these efforts to restrict homeschooling freedoms are driven by fear. There is fear of the unfamiliar and fear for others' safety and well-being.

Fear of the unfamiliar and fear for others' safety have previously led us down disturbing paths as a nation. We fear what we don't know and can't control. Calls to regulate homeschoolers—often by tying them to a standardized schooled framework with frequent monitoring—originate from fear of who they are and what they do. Eroding the liberties of an entire group out of an unfounded fear of a few bad apples steadily chips away at the fabric of a free society.

“If the homeschoolers are doing everything right, then they won't mind some oversight,” is a common refrain from regulation advocates. But that is like saying, if I have nothing to hide it's okay for the government to listen to my phone calls and read my emails. It's a breach of privacy and an inappropriate use of state power.

We can't always protect all of our citizens from harm, but we can be aware when trying to protect them may do more harm than good. A free society depends on liberty and choice and freedom from government intervention. Instead of regulating the unfamiliar, we should seek to understand, tolerate, and perhaps learn from what it may teach us.

## **Homeschoolers: The Enemy of Forced Schooling**

I was born in 1977, the year John Holt launched the first-ever newsletter for homeschooling families, [\*Growing Without Schooling\*](#). At that time, Holt became the unofficial leader of the nascent homeschooling movement, supporting parents in the process of removing their children from school even before the practice was fully legalized in all states by 1993. Today, his writing remains an inspiration for many of us who homeschool our children.

Holt believed strongly in the self-educative capacity of all people, including young people. As a classroom teacher in private schools in both Colorado and Massachusetts, he witnessed first-hand the ways in which institutional schooling inhibits the natural process of learning.

Holt was especially concerned about the myriad of ways that schooling suppresses a child's natural learning instincts by forcing the child to learn what the teacher wants him to know. Holt believed that parents and educators should

support a child's natural learning, not control it. He wrote in his 1976 book, [\*Instead of Education\*](#):

My concern is not to improve 'education' but to do away with it, to end the ugly and anti-human business of people-shaping and to allow and help people to shape themselves.[\[1\]](#)

## **Self-Determined Learning**

Holt observed through his years of teaching, and recorded in his many books, that the deepest, most meaningful, most enduring learning is the kind of learning that is self-determined.

As "the enemy," we homeschoolers reject the increasing grip of mass schooling.

One of his most influential books, originally published in 1967, is *How Children Learn*. It was [re-published](#) in 2017 in honor of its 50th anniversary, with a new Foreword by progressive educator and author, Deborah Meier. In her early days as an educator, Meier says, she was influenced by Holt's work and was particularly drawn to his revelation that even supposedly "good schools" failed children through their coercive tactics. Meier writes in the Foreword:

While following Holt's deep exploration of how children learn I therefore wasn't surprised to discover Holt had joined 'the enemy'—homeschoolers. His little magazine, *Growing Without Schooling*, was the most useful guide a teacher could ever read. As time passed I began to change my views of homeschooling. I'm still first and foremost working to preserve public education but homeschoolers can be our allies in devising what truly powerful schooling could be like. If we saw the child as an insatiable nonstop learner, we would create schools that made it as easy and natural to do so as it was for most of us before we first entered the schoolroom.[\[2\]](#)

## **Compulsory Education is Always Coercive**

The trouble with Meier's line of reasoning is that it presumes this is something schools can do. Mass schooling is, by its nature, compulsory and coercive.



Supporting “an insatiable nonstop learner” within such a vast system of social control is nearly impossible.

Holt said so himself. In his later books, as he moved away from observations of conventional classrooms and toward “the enemy” of homeschoolers, Holt acknowledged that the compulsory nature of schooling prevented the type of natural learning he advocated. He writes in his popular 1981 book, [\*Teach Your Own\*](#):

At first I did not question the compulsory nature of schooling. But by 1968 or so I had come to feel strongly that the kinds of changes I wanted to see in schools, above all in the ways teachers related to students, could not happen as long as schools were compulsory.[3]

Holt continues:

From many such experiences I began to see, in the early '70s, slowly and reluctantly, but ever more surely, that the movement for school reform was mostly a fad and an illusion. Very few people, inside the schools or out, were willing to support or even tolerate giving more freedom, choice, and self-direction to children . . . In short, it was becoming clear to me that the great majority of boring, regimented schools were doing exactly what they had always done and what most people wanted them to do. Teach children about Reality. Teach them that Life Is No Picnic. Teach them to Shut Up and Do What You're Told.[4]

While progressive educators like Meier may have the best intentions and believe strongly that schools can be less coercive, the reality is quite different. Over the past half-century, mass schooling has become more restrictive and more consuming of a child's day and year, beginning at ever-earlier ages. High-stakes testing and zero tolerance discipline policies heighten coercion, and taxpayer-funded after-school programming and universal pre-k classes often mean that children spend much of their childhood at school.

As “the enemy,” we homeschoolers reject the increasing grip of mass schooling and acknowledge what Holt came to realize: compulsory schooling cannot nurture non-coercive, self-directed learning. Holt writes in *Teach Your Own*: “Why do people take or keep their children out of school? Mostly for three

reasons: they think that raising their children is their business not the government's; they enjoy being with their children and watching and helping them learn, and don't want to give that up to others; they want to keep them from being hurt, mentally, physically, and spiritually.”<sup>[5]</sup> Today, those same reasons ring true for many homeschoolers.

It's worth grabbing the anniversary copy of John Holt's *How Children Learn*. His observations on the ways children naturally learn, and the ways most schools impede this learning, are timeless and insightful. But it is also worth remembering that Holt's legacy is tied to the homeschooling movement and to supporting parents in moving away from a coercive model of schooling toward a self-directed model of learning.

After all, Holt reminds us in *Teach Your Own*: “What is most important and valuable about the home as a base for children's growth in the world is not that it is a better school than the schools but that it isn't a school at all.”<sup>[6]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Holt, John. 2004. *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People do Things Better*. First ed. 1976, E.P. Dutton & Co. Colorado: Sentient Publications.

<sup>[2]</sup> Meier, Deborah. 2017. Foreword to *How Children Learn*, 50th Anniversary Edition by John Holt. New York: Da Capo Press.

<sup>[3]</sup> Holt, John. 2003. *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book of Homeschooling*. New York: Da Capo Press.

<sup>[4]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[6]</sup> Ibid.

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Holt continues:

From many such experiences I began to see, in the early '70s, slowly and reluctantly, but ever more surely, that the movement for school reform was mostly a fad and an illusion. Very few people, inside the schools or out, were willing to support or even tolerate giving more freedom, choice, and self-direction to children. . . . In short, it was becoming clear to me that the great

majority of boring, regimented schools were doing exactly what they had always done and what most people wanted them to do. Teach children about Reality. Teach them that Life Is No Picnic. Teach them to Shut Up and Do What You're Told.[4]

While progressive educators like Meier may have the best intentions and believe strongly that schools can be less coercive, the reality is quite different. Over the past half-century, mass schooling has become more restrictive and more consuming of a child's day and year, beginning at ever-earlier ages. High-stakes testing and zero tolerance discipline policies heighten coercion, and taxpayer-funded after-school programming and universal pre-k classes often mean that children spend much of their childhood at school.

As "the enemy," we homeschoolers reject the increasing grip of mass schooling and acknowledge what Holt came to realize: compulsory schooling cannot nurture non-coercive, self-directed learning. Holt writes in *Teach Your Own*: "Why do people take or keep their children out of school? Mostly for three reasons: they think that raising their children is their business not the government's; they enjoy being with their children and watching and helping them learn, and don't want to give that up to others; they want to keep them from being hurt, mentally, physically, and spiritually." [5] Today, those same reasons ring true for many homeschoolers.

It's worth grabbing the anniversary copy of John Holt's *How Children Learn*. His observations on the ways children naturally learn, and the ways most schools impede this learning, are timeless and insightful. But it is also worth remembering that Holt's legacy is tied to the homeschooling movement and to supporting parents in moving away from a coercive model of schooling toward a self-directed model of learning.

After all, Holt reminds us in *Teach Your Own*: "What is most important and valuable about the home as a base for children's growth in the world is not that it is a better school than the schools but that it isn't a school at all." [6]

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[1] Holt, John. 2004. *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People do Things Better*. First ed. 1976, E.P. Dutton & Co. Colorado: Sentient Publications.

[2] Meier, Deborah. 2017. *Foreword to How Children Learn*, 50th Anniversary Edition by John Holt. New York: Da Capo Press.

[3] Holt, John. 2003. *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book of Homeschooling*. New York: Da Capo Press.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

# Hard-Won Homeschooling Freedoms Are Under Threat and Must Be Defended

Homeschoolers today have it easy. Many of us were in diapers when, in 1977, educator [John Holt](#) created *Growing Without Schooling*, the first newsletter to connect and encourage homeschooling families. Holt and other social reformers provided the support and facilitated the networks that would ultimately lead to homeschooling becoming legally recognized and widespread.

I sometimes wonder about the courage it took those earlier homeschooling parents to remove their children from school before it was fully legal, to chart an alternative education path for their children when they were often the only ones on that road. I sometimes wonder if I would have had the same courage.

## Homeschooling Is Going Mainstream

Now, homeschooling is a legitimate education option with the number of homeschoolers hovering around two million nationwide. With expanding numbers come increased diversity as families of all races, classes, religions, ethnicities, ideologies, and academic philosophies tailor homeschooling to their distinct needs and lifestyles. For example, the number of [African Americans choosing to homeschool](#) continues to rise, often propelled by concerns of institutional racism in schools, and [Muslim Americans](#) are reported to be one of the fastest-growing homeschooling demographics.

As homeschooling has become widely accepted and more reflective of our pluralistic society, it is easy to become complacent. Most of us no longer worry about truancy officers knocking on our doors or wonder where we will need to move next to find a community more accepting of family-centered education. We happily play outside on a spring weekday morning without fear that passersby will worry why our children aren't in school. We choose from a vast assortment of pedagogical approaches, selecting styles that best suit the needs of our children—not school personnel.

We may forget what a recent privilege all of this is. Our freedom to homeschool as we choose is owed in large part to those courageous parents who came before us. Their choice, and their activism, made our homeschooling choice possible and pleasant.

## But the Freedom Is Precarious

Our modern homeschooling freedoms also come with the responsibility to protect those freedoms. While we may not have had to fight to secure our homeschooling rights, we should certainly fight to keep them. As homeschooling moves from the marginal to the mainstream, it can trigger state efforts to curb freedoms, heighten regulations, and increase oversight.

Whether or not we would have had the courage to create these homeschooling freedoms we now enjoy, we must have the courage to keep them.

We are seeing this effort mount in California, as an [egregious case](#) of alleged abuse by one family has led to recent legislative efforts to crack-down on homeschooling in the state. Current proposed legislation aims to rein in homeschooling families and require government monitoring, including forming an advisory committee to investigate, and potentially “reform,” homeschooling. As NPR [reports](#): “That could be anything from home inspections to credentialing teachers to setting specific curriculums.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Now is the time for those of us homeschooling today to show our gratitude to those who came before us by continuing their fight. It is up to us to preserve our homeschooling freedoms from government encroachment so that we may continue to live a life free of school and school-like thinking.

Whether or not we would have had the courage to create these homeschooling freedoms we now enjoy, we must have the courage to keep them.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Purper, Benjamin. 2018. “California Lawmakers Consider How to Regulate Home Schools After Abuse Discovery.” *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2018/04/09/600245558/california-lawmakers-consider-how-to-regulate-homeschools-after-abuse-discovery>



# Why Homeschooled Children Love Reading

I saw the headline in Monday's *Harvard Gazette*: "Life Stories Keep Harvard Bibliophile Fixed to the Page."[\[1\]](#) My first thought was, "I bet he was homeschooled."

He was.

The [article](#) describes the experience of Harvard University junior, Luke Kelly, who grew up in Mississippi and was homeschooled for most of his childhood. Much of his time was spent reading and he developed a passion for books and literature.

Why did I suspect that a bibliophile college student was homeschooled before even reading the article? Because most homeschoolers love to read—I mean, really love to read. Many of them develop this affinity because they have the time, space, and freedom to read when they want, what they want, how they want.

Released from standard schooling constraints that dictate reading materials and create arbitrary reading levels, homeschoolers learn quickly that books are vital tools for knowledge and discovery. They are not the props of arduous assignments. They are vibrant narratives that entertain and edify.

With homeschooling, reading is not a separate subject to be covered at certain times in certain ways; rather it is an integral and seamless part of overall learning. Trips to the library are not reserved for 40-minute blocks once a week with a librarian-led lesson. Homeschoolers often spend hours at the library, scouting the shelves in search of a good story, seeking librarian advice when needed, exploring the vastness of its real and digital resources.

And boy do they read! My older daughter has read more books in the past six months than I read in my entire K-12 public schooling stint.

Homeschoolers are also able to learn to read at their own pace, on their own timetable, following their own interests. With mass schooling, reading is regimented. Children learn to read in a specific way, following a specific curriculum, at a specific time. Increasingly, that time is being pushed to remarkably young ages. Kindergarteners are now expected to do the serious seat-work previously reserved for older children. Even preschoolers are being pressured.

Erika Christakis, author of *The Importance of Being Little*, writes about the dramatic changes in early childhood education. She explains that much of this

change originates from more standardized, Common Core-based curriculum and high-stakes testing requirements. Christakis [writes](#):

Because so few adults can remember the pertinent details of their own preschool or kindergarten years, it can be hard to appreciate just how much the early-education landscape has been transformed over the past two decades. . . A child who's supposed to read by the end of kindergarten had better be getting ready in preschool. As a result, expectations that may arguably have been reasonable for 5- and 6-year-olds, such as being able to sit at a desk and complete a task using pencil and paper, are now directed at even younger children, who lack the motor skills and attention span to be successful. Preschool classrooms have become increasingly fraught spaces, with teachers cajoling their charges to finish their 'work' before they can go play.[\[2\]](#)

Teachers are beginning to internalize these standards, rather than question them. As assistant professor of education, Daphna Bassok, and her colleagues at the University of Virginia [discovered](#): In 1998, 31% of teachers believed that children should learn to read while in kindergarten. In 2010, that number was 80%.

Many kids who are not developmentally ready to read on this increasingly pressurized, standardized school timeline are then slapped with a learning disability label and given an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to get them caught up to the herd. This can often lead to deep resentment, not only of reading but of learning in general.

Homeschoolers avoid the standardization and regimentation of forced schooling, and their learning is often much richer and more meaningful as a result. It's also more joyful.

So I wasn't surprised that a college bibliophile was homeschooled. I would have been surprised if he wasn't.

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[\[1\]](#) Rodsken, Jill. 2017. "Life Stories Keep Him Turning (and Sniffing) the Page." *The Harvard Gazette*.  
<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/10/life-stories-keep-harvard-bibliophile-fixed-to-the-page/>

[2] Christakis, Erika. 2016. "The New Preschool Is Crushing Kids." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/01/the-new-preschool-is-crushing-kids/419139/>

# Delay Schooling for Happier, More Well-Adjusted Children

If you are one of those parents who decided to delay your child's schooling, or forgo it altogether, you have plenty of company. According to [Education Week](#), in the years 2008-2010 fewer than half of U.S. children under age five attended preschool, and the number of stay-at-home-parents has been [rising](#) over the past decade.

## A Rising Trend

Additionally, there are about two million homeschoolers in this country and those numbers are increasing dramatically. A 2013 report by [Education News](#) found that the number of children being homeschooled in the United States has increased by 75 percent over 14 years. Children who started school later were able to exhibit more self-regulation and had better mental health markers. The report noted that “the number of primary school kids whose parents choose to forgo traditional education is growing seven times faster than the number of kids enrolling in K-12 every year.”

Many of these parents who choose to delay or forgo schooling for their children may be influenced by mounting research showing that early schooling is not beneficial to most children, and in fact may be harmful to many. Most significantly, a [2008 longitudinal study](#) by psychology professor, Dr. Howard Friedman, of the University of California, Riverside, concluded that “early school entry was associated with less educational attainment, worse midlife adjustment, and most importantly, increased mortality risk.”[\[1\]](#) In an article in the United Kingdom's Telegraph, Professor Friedman [asserts](#):

Most children under age six need lots of time to play, and to develop social skills, and to learn to control their impulses. An over-emphasis on formal classroom instruction—that is, studies instead of buddies, or staying in instead of playing out—can have serious effects that might not be apparent until years later.

[\[2\]](#)

## No Added Benefit

In fact, the UK seems to be taking Dr. Friedman's research, and that of others, to heart in an attempt to halt the expansion of formal schooling to earlier ages. In 2013, a respected group of more than 130 researchers and practitioners in the early childhood education field [argued](#) that formal schooling should be delayed until age six or seven, citing the "profound damage" that early schooling is causing children.[\[3\]](#)

Here in the U.S. a 2015 research paper by Stanford University professor, Thomas Dee, [found](#) that delaying school entry led to less hyperactivity and more attentiveness. Children who entered formal schooling closer to age 7 were able to exhibit more self-regulation and had better mental health markers than children who entered school at age 6 or earlier. Even more remarkable is that this effect was sustained until at least age 11.[\[4\]](#)

But what about the poor and disadvantaged children who purportedly benefit from earlier, more formal schooling? Dr. Richard House, a senior lecturer at the University of Roehampton in London, [argues](#):

There are of course some children from very deprived backgrounds who on balance would, and certainly do, gain a net benefit from such early interventions. But the evidence is now quite overwhelming that such an early introduction to institutional learning is not only quite unnecessary for the vast majority of children, but can actually cause major developmental harm, and at worst a shortened life-span.[\[5\]](#)

As efforts mount both domestically and abroad to push academics and expand government schooling to increasingly younger children, it is important for parents to look at the data and implications of such early education policy. While the relatively small percentage of children from "very deprived backgrounds," as Dr. House states, may benefit from more rigorous early schooling, the vast majority of young children are not helped—and may in fact be harmed—by accelerated institutional learning.

It is no wonder that more and more parents are recognizing the serious effects that play-deprivation and forced academics can have on young children. In growing numbers, these parents are choosing to delay formal schooling—or avoid it altogether—and cultivate a nurturing, play-filled, family-centered

childhood in their homes and throughout their communities.

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[1] Friedman, Howard S. and Kern, Margaret L. 2008. "Early Educational Milestones as Predictors of Lifelong Academic Achievement, Midlife Adjustment, and Longevity." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 30, no. 4 (winter): 419–430.  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2713445/>

[2] Paton, Graeme. 2012. "Bright Children Should Start School at Six, says Academic." *The Telegraph*.  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9266592/Bright-children-should-start-school-at-six-says-academic.html>

[3] Paton, Graeme. 2013. "Start Schooling Later Than Age Five, say Experts." *The Telegraph*.  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10302249/Start-schooling-later-than-age-five-say-experts.html>

[4] Wong, May. 2015. "Study Finds Improved Self-Regulation in Kindergartners Who Wait a Year to Enroll." *Stanford News Center*.  
<https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-gse-research-finds-strong-evidence-mental-health-benefits-delaying-kindergarten>

[5] Paton, Graeme. 2012. "Bright Children Should Start School at Six, says Academic." *The Telegraph*.  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9266592/Bright-children-should-start-school-at-six-says-academic.html>

## **“Back to School” Is Not Inevitable**

*The New York Times* [article](#) on “6 Things Parents Should Know About Sending Kids Back To School” begins:

Surely there are some kids who are eager for school to start, but I have not met them. My 9-year-old and 5-year-old daughters have little interest now in trading day trips to the beach and family movie nights for an unfamiliar classroom and nightly homework.[\[1\]](#)

So don’t make them.

Our culture treats schooling as if it’s inevitable. Like death and taxes, it’s a necessary evil. Even if we know kids don’t want to return to school—are dragging their heels or are downright obstinate—we laugh it off. Everyone knows school stinks. You just have to hold your nose and jump.

For many progressive reformers, dating back to the days of John Dewey, the key is just to make schooling gentler. Spruce it up a bit, make it more engaging and relevant, paint the classroom walls a prettier color. Then it will be ok.

I don’t buy it. You can add curtains to the jail cells but it’s no less a prison.

### **Out-of-the-Box Education**

I often have people say to me when I advocate for [alternatives to school](#) that we shouldn’t “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” There’s no need to do away with compulsory schooling, they say; we just need to reform what we’ve got. But progressive reformers have been trying this for decades with little impact, at least inside of the mass schooling monopoly. Not only have progressive reforms not worked, by most accounts mass schooling has become even more restrictive.

Within the context of a system of coercive schooling, created by 19th-century ideologues to bring order and compliance to the masses, there is no room for creativity, no palate for innovation. We need to look outside of standard schooling for education models that actually work. And we often need to look way outside for models that work and that retain children’s natural curiosity and exuberance for learning.

[NorthStar](#), a self-directed learning center for teens in western Massachusetts, has a great motto: “Learning is Natural, School is Optional.” Schooling alternatives, like NorthStar, recognize that thinking out-of-the-box about education isn’t enough. You have to reject the box altogether and create an entirely new geometric shape. Schooling is the box. What does learning look like?

This process takes some imagination. Most of us have been schooled to believe that schooling is necessary, that learning is unpleasant, that all kids dread September and the daily confines of the classroom walls. That is Life, we are told. Suck it up. Because then someday you’ll have to be an Adult and spend your days in a job you hate with bosses you can’t stand in a confining, mind-numbing workplace that saps your soul. Get used to it.

We rarely question why. We rarely challenge the origins of mass schooling to cultivate such conformity, such hopelessness, such inevitability. It just is.

## **It Doesn’t Have to Be This Way**

Schooling is one mode of education, but it is not the only one. There are other ways to learn, to know, to be educated. There are [real models](#) of education—that look nothing like school—that are wildly successful in nurturing children’s learning and development. Unschooling, democratic schooling, self-directed learning centers are just a few of the educational possibilities that reject the schooling box and create something entirely new.

As back-to-school time approaches and articles swarm on how to make the transition to September easier and more successful, maybe it’s worth pausing to ask: If something is so unpleasant for so many of us, why are we doing it?

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[1] Rabkin Peachman, Rachel. 2017. “6 Things Parents Should Know About Sending Kids Back to School.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/well/family/6-things-parents-should-know-about-sending-kids-back-to-school.html>



# **Unschooling and Self-Directed Education**

# Schooling Was for the Industrial Era, Unschooling Is for the Future

Our current compulsory schooling model was created at the dawn of the Industrial Age. As factories replaced farm work and production moved swiftly outside of homes and into the larger marketplace, 19th century American schooling mirrored the factories that most students would ultimately join.

The bells and buzzers signaling when students could come and go, the tedium of the work, the straight lines and emphasis on conformity and compliance, the rows of young people sitting passively at desks while obeying their teachers, the teachers obeying the principal, and so on—all of this was designed for factory-style efficiency and order.

## The Imagination Age

The trouble is that we have left the Industrial Era for the [Imagination Age](#), but our mass education system remains fully entrenched in factory-style schooling. By many accounts, mass schooling has become even more restrictive than it was a century ago, consuming more of childhood and adolescence than at any time in our history. The first compulsory schooling statute, passed in Massachusetts in 1852, required 8 to 14-year-olds to attend school a mere 12 weeks a year, six of which were to be consecutive. This seems almost laughable compared to the childhood behemoth that mass schooling has now become.

Enclosing children in increasingly restrictive schooling environments for most of their formative years, and drilling them with a standardized, test-driven curriculum is woefully inadequate for the Imagination Age. In her book, [Now You See It](#), Cathy Davidson says that 65 percent of children now entering elementary school will work at jobs in the future that have not yet been invented. She writes: “In this time of massive change, we’re giving our kids the tests and lesson plans designed for their great-great-grandparents.”[\[1\]](#)

While the past belonged to assembly line workers, the future belongs to creative thinkers, experimental doers, and inventive makers. The past relied on passivity; the future will be built on passion. In a recent [article](#) on the future of work, author and strategist John Hagel III writes about the need to nurture passion to be successful and fulfilled in the jobs to come. He says:

One of my key messages to individuals in this changing world is to find your passion and integrate your passion with your work. One of the challenges today is that most people are products of the schools and society we've had, which encourage you to go to work to get a paycheck, and if it pays well, that's a good job, versus encouraging you to find your passion and find a way to make a living from it.[\[2\]](#)

## **Passion-Driven Learning**

Cultivating passion is nearly impossible within a coercive schooling structure that values conformity over creativity, compliance over exuberance. This could help explain why the unschooling, or [Self-Directed Education](#), movement is taking off, with more parents migrating from a schooling model of education for their children to a learning one. With Self-Directed Education, passion is at the center of all learning. Young people follow their interests and pursue their passions, while adults act as facilitators, connecting children and teens to the vast resources of both real and digital communities. In this model, learning is natural, non-coercive, and designed to be directed by the individual herself, rather than by someone else.

Self-Directed Education and unschooling often take place in homes and throughout communities, but increasingly individuals and organizations are launching self-directed learning centers geared toward homeschoolers with both full- and part-time options. These centers make Self-Directed Education more accessible to more families in more places, and each has a unique philosophy or focus. Some are geared toward teens and value real-world apprenticeships and immersion; others are makerspaces that emphasize tinkering and technology, and so on. In Boston, for instance, the [JP Green School](#) in the city's Jamaica Plain neighborhood serves as a part-time self-directed learning space for homeschoolers and unschoolers with a focus on sustainability and nature connection. Co-founder Andrée Zalesk [says](#):

People educated in coercive models will be damaged for life (most of us are). The lack of respect shown to their autonomous selves as children translates into a lifelong tendency to “get what they need” by any means necessary. . . We are part of a growing counterculture which finds traditional schooling damaging in

ways that are intertwined with the general brokenness of our culture.[3]

Instead of complaining about the education status quo, entrepreneurial individuals are building alternatives to school that challenge it. Centered around passion and an overarching belief in individual self-determination, these entrepreneurs—who are often parents, former school teachers, and others who have become disillusioned by coercive schooling—are freeing young people from an outdated and harmful mass schooling system. Enlightened parents and innovative entrepreneurs may be the key players in constructing a new education model focused on freedom and designed for the Imagination Age.

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[1] Davidson, Cathy N. 2012. *Now You See It: how Technology and Brain Science Will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century*. New York: Penguin Books.

[2] Hagel III, John and Schwarz, Jeff. 2017. “A Framework for Understanding the Future of Work.” *HR Times*. <https://hrtimesblog.com/2017/09/27/a-framework-for-understanding-the-future-of-work/>

[3] McDonald, Kerry. 2017. “Sustainability and Self-Direction in Boston: JP Green School.” Whole Family Learning. <http://www.wholefamilylearning.com/2017/09/sustainability-and-self-direction-in.html>

## **What Happens When You Ask Unschoolers “What They Want to Be When They Grow Up”**

My daughter is a baker. When people ask her what she wants to be when she grows up, she responds breezily: “A baker, but I already am one.”

You see, with unschooling there is no postponement of living and doing. There is no preparation for some amorphous future, no working toward something unknown.

There is simply life.

### **There Is No “After” in Unschooling**

To ask what a child wants to be when she grows up is to dismiss what she already is. The question of what a child wants to be when she grows up is a curious one well-rooted in our schooled society. Disconnected from everyday living and placed with same-age peers for the majority of her days and weeks, a schooled child learns quickly that “real life” starts after. It starts after all of the tedium, all of the memorizing and regurgitating, all of the command and control. It starts after she is told what to learn, what to think, whom to listen to. It starts after her natural creativity and instinctive drive to discover her world are systematically destroyed within a coercive system designed to do just that. She must wait to be.

With unschooling, there is no after. There is only now. My daughter is a baker because she bakes. She is also many other things. To ask what a child wants to be when she grows up is to dismiss what she already is, what she already knows, what she already does. Baking brings my daughter daily joy and fulfillment while also helping to nourish her family and friends. She writes a baking blog, sharing her recipe adaptations and advice. She reads cookbooks, watches cooking shows (The Great British Baking Show is a favorite), talks to other bakers—both adults and kids—to get ideas and tips. She learned this all on her own, following her own interests, and quickly outgrowing the library children’s room cookbook section to the adult aisles.

As unschooling parents, we provide the time, space, and connection to resources that enable her doing. She has unlimited access to the kitchen. She has abundant opportunities to visit the library and explore the Internet for real and

digital information to help her in her craft. She has three younger siblings and many neighbors and friends who are eager to be her taste-testers. Her work is also incredibly valuable. I have never made a pie from scratch but she makes them all the time, bringing them as frequent desserts to gatherings and special events. The market price for her delicious, seasonal pies would be steep.

## **Who Children Are, Not Who They Will Become**

Will she always be a baker? It's hard to say. Will I always be a writer? I think so, but who knows? Will any of us always be who we are now?

We can certainly have goals and ambitions that we work toward. My daughter wants to open a “bakery-makery” someday that combines her dual passions of baking and making, selling her pies and dolls side-by-side. That may be her future goal, but it doesn't stop her from being a baker and a maker today, creating and selling her goods when and where she can.

With unschooling, learning and living are seamless and synonymous. There is no separation of one from the other. There is no segregation of children from the “real world.” It is all real. The well-known educator, John Holt, who coined the term “unschooling” decades ago, wrote in his book, [\*Learning All The Time\*](#):

We can best help children learn, not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them, paying serious attention to what they do, answering their questions—if they have any—and helping them explore the things they are most interested in.[\[1\]](#)

Children are eager to explore and discover their world and to engage in meaningful work and actions tied to their interests and fueled by their limitless curiosity. Our job as parents is to listen to their interests and ideas, support and encourage them, and help connect them to the wider world around them.

Our job is not to prepare our children for who they will become, but to help them be who they already are.

*I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.*

—John Dewey ([1897](#))

[1] Holt, John. 1990. *Learning All the Time: How small children begin to read, write, count, and investigate the world, without being taught*. New York: Da Capo Press.

# **Ansel Adams Was Unschooled (How to Solve America's Creativity Crisis)**

Prompted by my nine-year-old son's emerging interest in photography, I have been introduced to the life and legacy of Ansel Adams, the renowned 20th-century American landscape photographer. As a curious and energetic child, with an innate need to move and act, schooling was not a good fit for Ansel. In his [autobiography](#), he describes his "native hyperactivity," and explains how trapped he felt in school. Ansel writes: "Each day was a severe test for me, sitting in a dreadful classroom while the sun and fog played outside."[\[1\]](#)

## **The Courage to Preserve Childhood Creativity**

Ansel's father recognized his son's natural exuberance and determined that Ansel needed more freedom to thrive. When Ansel was 12, his father removed him from school and homeschooled him, granting him abundant freedom and opportunity to pursue his own interests and passions. At home, Ansel learned to play the piano, becoming a professional musician before devoting his life to photography.

In 1915, his father gave his young teenage son a year's pass to the World's Fair. Ansel went every day, absorbing the wonder and ingenuity of the grand exposition. His father told him that would be his school. On a family vacation in 1916, Ansel visited Yosemite Valley for the first time, becoming enchanted by the place that would ultimately occupy his life and photographs for the next six decades. While there, his parents gave him his first camera. The rest is history. Ansel writes in his autobiography: "I often wonder at the strength and courage my father had in taking me out of the traditional school situation and providing me with these extraordinary learning experiences."[\[2\]](#)

Childhood creativity and ebullience are boundless. They are not dulled merely by age, but by circumstance. When children go to school, their creativity can be eroded by the pressures of conformity, their energy stifled—even sanctioned.

## **Declining Creativity**



As schooling has expanded over the past several decades, consuming more of childhood than ever before, and becoming more standardized and restrictive, it should be no surprise that American creativity has simultaneously plummeted. In her extensive research on creativity, KH Kim of the College of William & Mary analyzed nearly 300,000 creativity scores on the well-regarded Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. She found that American creativity scores increased each year between 1966 until 1990. From 1990 on, however, creativity scores have steadily declined. Most concerning is Kim's finding that the sharpest drop in creativity scores occurred in elementary-age children from kindergarten through 6th grade.

Kim shares her startling findings in her book, [\*The Creativity Challenge: How We can Recapture American Innovation\*](#). She writes: "The bottom line is this: Americans are less creative today than they were twenty-five years ago. Furthermore, this decline continues with no end in sight—Americans continue to become less creative over time." [3] While Kim points to a host of possible culprits for declining creativity, increasingly standardized schooling is a prominent one.

Creativity flourishes in freedom and shrivels with force. Some of our most creative children are ones like Ansel Adams, whose "native hyperactivity" may be even more essential in our fast-paced, rapidly changing culture. Their urgency for action, their unwillingness to entertain the mundane, their ingenuity and tolerance for the unknown are precisely the characteristics necessary for success in a new age of accelerating information and innovation.

The good news is that we don't need to train our children how to adapt to this post-industrial age. We simply need to avoid training out of them their natural creativity and exuberance. Children already possess the skills and characteristics that will enable them to thrive in a society that has no idea what jobs will exist when they grow up.

As parents, we need to take responsibility for nurturing our children's natural creativity, energy, and capacity for self-education. We need to grant our children freedom over force, allowing them to grow in their own way, revealing their own talents and gifts. We need to provide the educational conditions that enable childhood creativity to bloom, rather than wither under a system of coercion and conformity. As Ansel Adams writes of his father's choice to remove him from school: "I trace who I am and the direction of my development to those years of growing up in our house on the dunes, propelled especially by an internal spark tenderly kept alive and glowing by my father." [4]

Parents are the ones most capable of preparing children for an unknown future by keeping their present spark alive.

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[1] Adams, Ansel. 1996. *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Kim, KH. 2016. *The Creativity Challenge: How We Can Recapture American Innovation*. New York: Prometheus Books.

[4] Adams, 1996.

# What Unschoolers Have in Common with Jimi Hendrix

When he was 14 years old, guitar legend Jimi Hendrix got an old, one-string ukulele from the garbage. He played single notes, teaching himself by ear while listening to Elvis Presley songs. A year later, he bought his first acoustic guitar for \$5 and taught himself how to play. He practiced for hours each day, observed other guitarists, sought advice when needed, listened to an array of different music, especially blues, and soon created his first band.

With no formal guitar or music training, Hendrix developed a creative, experimental playing style. He went on to become a celebrated musician whom the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame calls “arguably the greatest instrumentalist in the history of rock music.”

He was entirely self-taught.

## Not Just Jimi

Humans have an extraordinary capacity for self-education or autodidacticism. We are innately designed to explore, discover, and synthesize the world around us. The term autodidacticism originates from the Ancient Greek words *autós* and *didaktikos*, or self-teaching. Today, it is [defined](#) as “education without the guidance of masters (such as teachers and professors) or institutions (such as schools).”

Autodidacticism flourished for much of human history, with some of the most influential historical figures teaching themselves. Famous autodidacts include Italian polymath Leonardo da Vinci, Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, American inventor [Thomas Edison](#), American president Abraham Lincoln, and American abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Even during American slavery, when it was illegal for a slave to be literate, the drive for self-education endured. As Heather Andrea Williams writes in her book, [\*Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom\*](#):

Despite laws and custom in slave states prohibiting enslaved people from learning to read and write, a small percentage managed, through ingenuity and will, to acquire a degree of

literacy in the antebellum period.[\[1\]](#)

It wasn't until the mid-19th-century advent of U.S. compulsory schooling laws that autodidacticism began its descent, becoming more exception than rule. The idea of self-directed learning was anathema to the growing apparatus of forced schooling, which demanded obedience and conformity and punished originality and willfulness.

Natural tendencies toward self-education eroded as mass schooling consumed more of childhood, teaching passivity over agency. As evolutionary developmental psychologist, Dr. Peter Gray writes in his 2013 book [Free To Learn](#):

Children are biologically predisposed to take charge of their own education. When they are provided with the freedom and means to pursue their own interests, in safe settings, they bloom and develop along diverse and unpredictable paths, and they acquire skills and confidence to meet life's challenges. In such an environment, children ask for any help they may need from adults. There is no need for forced lessons, lectures, assignments, tests, grades, segregation by age into classrooms, or any of the other trappings of our standard, compulsory system of schooling. All of these, in fact, interfere with children's natural ways of learning.[\[2\]](#)

## **Tech-Fueled Self-Directed Learning**

A half-century ago, educator and author John Holt revived our understanding of autodidacticism, advocating for "unschooling," or Self-Directed Education that takes place outside of traditional schools. His best-selling book, [How Children Learn](#), galvanized the modern homeschooling movement. In it, Holt writes:

We like to say that we send children to school to teach them to think. What we do, all too often, is to teach them to think badly, to give up a natural and powerful way of thinking in favor of a method that does not work well for them and that we rarely use ourselves.[\[3\]](#)

Holt's work spurred renewed interest in self-directed learning and set the

stage for reimagining education. Today, fueled by technological innovation that makes learning easier and more accessible than ever before, autodidacticism is experiencing a renaissance. Online resources, YouTube tutorials, learning apps, cyber-schools, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) provide real-time access to skills, knowledge, information, and ideas.

Autodidacts are transforming education in myriad ways. Homeschooling continues to [boom](#) as an outlet for more education freedom and self-direction, with up to half of the over two million U.S. homeschoolers embracing [some variety of unschooling](#). Increasingly, more careers rely on self-teaching skill-sets. For instance, a recent [poll](#) of software developers found that over 69 percent of them are at least partly self-taught. And tech leaders like Facebook and Netflix are [infusing schools](#) with self-directed learning software, inverting the typical student-teacher relationship and placing learners in charge of their own education.

Autodidacts are helping to shift education from a top-down schooling model to a self-directed learning one. As Jimi Hendrix concluded: “It all has to come from inside, though, I guess.”

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[1] Williams, Heather Andrea. 2004. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.

[2] Gray, Peter. 2013. *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*. New York: Basic Books.

[3] Holt, John. 2017. *How Children Learn*, 50th Anniversary edition. New York: Da Capo Press.

## **The Myth of Institutionalized Learning**

Saturday was spring clean-up day at our city community garden, where we just received a plot after a long time on the waiting list.

One of the gardeners announced that she was looking for volunteers who could help identify maple tree saplings. They needed to be spotted and removed before casting shadows on the growing crops. Two people spoke up, saying that they could identify maple seedlings: my 11-year-old daughter Molly and a veteran gardener who has been planting in that soil for decades.

When Molly said she knew how to identify the plants, the other gardeners were delightedly surprised. “Did you learn that in school?” one asked. “No, I homeschool,” Molly replied. “So, did you learn it in homeschool?” the gardener continued. “No, I just know it,” she answered cheerfully.

## **The Myth That Children Must Be Taught**

This weekend conversation exposes the deep, underlying myth in our culture that children cannot learn unless they are systematically taught. Whether in school or school-at-home, children can only learn when they are directed by an adult, when they follow an established curriculum, when they are prodded and assessed. How could a child possibly know how to identify plants if it wasn’t part of a school-like lesson?

Yet, this assumption was not placed on the older gardener who also knew how to identify the maples. No one asked her if she learned about tree identification in school, or if she had a recent refresher course on the topic. It was assumed that she knew this information from experience, from immersion. She had been gardening a long time and likely enjoyed the process, becoming increasingly interested in plant and soil life.

Maybe she spent time with other, more experienced gardeners who, over time, shared their wisdom with her. Maybe she read some books and referenced some field guides. No one questioned that the veteran gardener learned about maple-spotting through time, experience, and real-life immersion; yet, they had a hard time imagining that a child could do the same.

Molly became interested in gardening when she was quite young, prompted in part by her great-aunt’s passion and talent for gardening. A master gardener, her aunt happily included Molly and her siblings in gardening efforts over the

years. Molly became particularly interested in plant identification. She asked a lot of questions and absorbed all of the answers, through active involvement in the real-life process of gardening and exploring nature. She also referred to books and field guides periodically, when it mattered to her. Molly learned about plants from following her interests, asking questions of those more knowledgeable, listening thoughtfully to answers, and, crucially, from doing the real work of gardening. She learned the same way the older gardener learned, the way most humans naturally learn.

## **We Learn In Spite of Classrooms, Not Because of Them**

Most of what I know today was not what I learned in school. It is what I have learned since school while following my own interests and pursuing meaningful work. This is how most of us adults learn—particularly if we have been fortunate enough to retain, or rekindle, that innate spark of human curiosity so often dimmed by conventional schooling.

As the renowned social reformer, Paul Goodman, wrote in [\*Compulsory Mis-education\*](#):

The hard task of education is to liberate and strengthen a youth's initiative, and at the same time to see to it that he knows what is necessary to cope with the on-going activities and culture of society, so that his initiative can be relevant. It is absurd to think that this task can be accomplished by so much sitting in a box facing front, manipulating symbols at the direction of distant administrators. This is rather a way to regiment and brainwash.

[\[1\]](#)

Children do not need to sit in a classroom, or at the kitchen table, following a regimented curriculum of knowledge deemed by others to be important. They learn as all people naturally learn when free from institutionalized education: by following the human instinct to explore, discover, and synthesize our world.

Children are astoundingly eager and capable learners when they are granted freedom, respect, and authentic opportunities to interact as vital members of their larger community. We must remove them from the box and welcome them to the world.

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[\[1\]](#) Goodman, Paul. 1966. *Compulsory Mis-Education and the Community of Scholars*. New York: Vintage Books.



# **Purpose-Driven Learning Is the Only Kind that Lasts**

Do you remember sentence-diagramming in school? I do. It was the onerous process of breaking apart individual sentences into their component parts and identifying those parts, like the subject, the verb, the modifiers, and so on.

By the time sentence-diagramming was introduced in elementary school, I had learned how to play the game of school. I had learned that obedience, memorization, and regurgitation of exactly what the teacher wants is the key to school success. I played it well. Looking back, and witnessing how my own unschooled children learn how to write, I realize how arbitrary and artificial learning in school was.

## **Playing the Game**

Along with sentence diagrams, we also learned how to write simple letters and five-paragraph essays, again by dissecting component parts and following meaningless (to us) writing prompts. Those of us who could ignore the fabrication and effectively mimic the teacher did well. Those who refused to play the game did not.

The reality is that sentence-diagramming and copying someone else's writing template don't create better writers. They create students who may meet contrived curriculum benchmarks and pass standardized tests. They create students who can play the game.

With unschooling, there is no game to play. There is no manufactured curriculum or assessment. There is simply life.

## **Learning for a Purpose**

My son Jack (age 9) downloaded an app this week that offered a free 7-day trial. It includes an abundance of content related to [skateboarding](#), one of his present passions. There is a section of content in the app that he particularly likes, and he wanted to know how often that content is refreshed before deciding whether or not to purchase the app. He searched the company's website for information. Unable to find the answer to his question, he drafted and sent the following email:

To Whom It May Concern:

I am interested in subscribing to [your company's channel] mostly for the show "XYZ" (and others). Right now I am in a 7 day free trial and am very pleased. I was wondering when the "XYZ" upload date would be. Is it once every 2 days or once every 2000 days?

Thanks,  
Jack

We didn't spend time on sentence-diagramming. He learns parts of speech from playing [MadLibs](#) with his siblings sometimes. He likes to [practice typing](#) to get faster and better. He asked me how to address a letter to someone when you don't know his or her name, and the rest he wrote by sincerely expressing himself about something that matters to him. He learned spelling and punctuation by reading a lot and reading things that he wants to read.

This wasn't an "activity" we decided to do that day. It didn't occur as part of a curriculum segment on letter-writing or in preparation for a standardized test. It wasn't a lesson. Jack wrote this letter because he needed information that was otherwise unavailable. In short, he wrote this letter for the same reason you or I might write a letter: because it is purposeful. When we write, it is for a reason. It is authentic.

## **Living as Learning**

In my forthcoming [Unschooler](#) book, I highlight the story of a grown unschooler who didn't really write until he was a teenager. Then, he wanted to communicate with a girl he liked and wanted to impress her. That provided the real and motivating context to write—and to write well. He never had formal writing instruction as an unschooler, but after writing back and forth to the girl, he realized that he liked both the girl and the writing! He became increasingly passionate about writing, ultimately majoring in journalism in college and becoming a successful journalist.

When learning is connected to living, it is meaningful. It is not something that occurs at certain times, in certain places, with certain people. It occurs all the time, everywhere, and with everyone around us. Unschooling allows natural learning to occur by providing the time, space, support, and opportunity for

interests to emerge and talents to sprout. With unschooling, reading, writing, and arithmetic become purposeful activities connected to personal interests and motivations.

Writing letters is enjoyable and important when it is necessary for your own purposes. Writing letters when someone else tells you to—when it is forced—may not be so fun or helpful. As Plato [warns](#): “Knowledge which is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind.”

# My Homeschoolers Love Worksheets, Because They're 100% Voluntary

Unschooling and workbooks. Isn't that an oxymoron? Isn't the whole idea of unschooling that you don't follow a curriculum or adopt a schooled mindset?

It's true that unschooling, generally speaking, means [living as if school doesn't exist](#). It means avoiding curriculum and the classic stereotype of "kitchen table" homeschooling, all gathered around the table doing lessons that the parent dictates.

Unschooling, or [Self-Directed Education](#), means giving young people the freedom and opportunity to direct their own learning, following their own interests and passions, using the full resources of real and digital communities, without coercion.

That's a mouthful, but the key phrase is: without coercion. Learning is not forced. Unschooling parents surround their children with abundant resources and tools, making the wider world as accessible as possible to explore.

John Holt, who coined the term "unschooling" in the late 1970s to differentiate Self-Directed Education from traditional, school-at-home homeschooling, reinforces this point. He writes in [Learning All The Time](#):

We can best help children learn, not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them, paying serious attention to what they do, answering their questions—if they have any—and helping them explore the things they are most interested in.[\[1\]](#)

Just as we have crayons and paper, books and computers, yarn and playdough, magazines and watercolors, we have workbooks. They are nothing fancy—just the ones you can pick up at a local store or online (my gang seems to like Brain Quest)—but they are scattered around our home. These workbooks are available to the kids, just like all other tools and supplies, to use and explore as they like.

My kids have never been to school and have no mental model to associate worksheets with drudgery. And you know something? They love them. Often if they are looking for something to do, they'll grab a workbook, find some pages

that look interesting, and work at them—asking questions when needed. Sometimes they will get so into these workbooks, (particularly my older two) that they will spend a long while completing page after page.

When I tell people my kids like workbooks and often seek them out, they think I am either crazy or lying. Who likes workbooks? But they do, and so do other unschoolers I know. Partly I think this is because my kids have never been to school and have no mental model to associate worksheets with drudgery. And partly I think they like workbooks because they are not forced to do them. They freely use workbooks when and how they choose, focusing on the content that matters most to them, and they can freely stop using them whenever they want to.

Kids don't need to be forced to learn. They want to learn, to explore and discover their world, in ways that are meaningful to them. When young people are granted the freedom and opportunity to learn that we adults take for granted, their learning is deeper and richer and more enduring than anything learned under compulsion. Grown-ups provide the time, space, resources, and support for learning. The kids do the rest.

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[1] Holt, John. 1990. *Learning All the Time: How small children begin to read, write, count, and investigate the world, without being taught*. New York: Da Capo Press.

# **Freedom, Not Force, Creates Lifelong Readers and Learners**

I remember the book I read that would set me on my life's initial career path. I was 14, and it was lying in a book bin in the small den on the first floor of my childhood home. For 8th grade English class, we had a brief and unusual hiatus from whatever curriculum directives dominated the syllabus and we were allowed to read whatever book we wanted. It was called "free choice."

## **Finding a Spark in Freedom**

The pages of Dale Carnegie's classic [bestseller](#), *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, captivated me. A blend of historical anecdotes and real-life applications for understanding human relations, Carnegie's book triggered a fledgling personal interest in both business and self-improvement. Years later, as I founded my own corporate training company and taught hundreds of professionals across the country in business workshops ranging from public speaking to client service to leadership skills, the key idea of individual self-mastery first planted by Carnegie's book remained with me and was echoed throughout the classes I taught.

I don't remember much else about 8th grade English. The lessons that stayed with me, and that would ultimately define my early professional life, had nothing to do with what I learned in school. Perhaps that is why I am such a vocal advocate for freedom and choice in learning: the seminal lesson from my time in school was the brief moment I was given "free choice" to do something completely outside the ordained curriculum, following my own interests.

This is one reason why I don't tell my children what books to read. They are free to choose whatever books interest them, whatever styles and genres and subjects fascinate them at any given time. My job is to connect them to available resources, to make frequent visits with them to the local library, to fill our home with a variety and abundance of books and other reading material, to read to them often and to model my own love of reading for them. But all of their books are "free choice."

## **Why Do We Bludgeon Children with Books?**

At seven, my daughter Abby is our family's newest reader. She told me the other day: "Mama, I only read books that I like." It was such a simple, yet culturally radical, statement—for a child anyway. I replied that I, too, only read books that I like. Most of us adults are, I hope, free to choose what books we read and don't read. Yet, for children, we often assume that there are certain things they must read. Not only that, we often force them to learn to read in a long, arduous, mundane process, completely disconnected from their interests and on an arbitrary timeline that increasingly pushes young children to read before they are developmentally ready.

If we were to design a system of reading instruction certain to fuel a general dislike of reading, and by extension learning, then we would create a system that forces children to read things they don't like and that have no meaning for them, at ever-earlier ages, with rampant labeling, tracking, testing, and interventions to ensure that they meet an artificial curriculum standard. Are we surprised that [one-quarter](#) of American adults haven't read a book, in whole or in part, in the last year?

"But there are certain topics children should know about," one might say. "American history, for example." I agree that it is desirable for educated citizens living in a free and democratic society to have a certain collective knowledge about important topics. But I disagree that the best way to impart this knowledge in a free and democratic society is through force.

### **Maybe "Free Choice" Is the Answer**

This may also explain why, according to a 2017 University of Pennsylvania [poll](#), 37 percent of Americans could not identify one right protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution! Curriculum by force, and knowledge imparted through compulsory schooling, may not be working so well.

"But surely you have read things in your life that you didn't like but that you had to read," a critic may add. Yes, I am sure that I was not thrilled to read certain journal articles or essays in college or graduate school, for instance, but I chose to go to college, and I chose to take that course in pursuit of an individual goal. The choice, and attendant responsibility, were on me. I could also have chosen not to go to college and not to take that course or pursue that goal. Most children are not granted that same free choice in their learning.

As author Ray Bradbury famously [said](#): "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them." If we want an educated

and engaged citizenry, with a passion for reading and knowledge and ongoing self-improvement, then perhaps “free choice” should be the norm rather than the exception.



# **We Don't Give Our Kids Exams. But That Does Not Mean They Are Not Tested.**

“If you don't teach them, how will they ever learn?”

“If you give them freedom, how will they gain discipline?”

“Without schooling, won't they just do nothing all day?”

These questions are only a sampling of the typical unschooler's interrogation. I get it. Unschooling challenges everything we have been taught about learning, knowing, and growing.

At a friend's birthday party this weekend, the topic of unschooling came up. After I had explained, thoroughly I thought, that we don't replicate school-at-home, that we learn in and from our daily life in the city, that the children's interests guide their learning, that we [live as if school doesn't exist](#), the person paused and asked: “So do you give them exams?”

Sigh.

## **Unschooling and Martial Arts**

Unschooling epitomizes self-discipline and self-direction: key qualities of martial arts training.

The conversation was all the more poignant given the martial arts tournament Molly competed in earlier that day. During a walk around the city last fall, we passed a newly opened martial arts school. Molly was intrigued. She walked in, made an appointment for a trial class, and was instantly captivated. Since then, she spends three afternoons a week at martial arts classes. Her enthusiasm spread to her younger sister, and now Abby joins her for classes.

If you are unfamiliar with martial arts, as I was, it is a very disciplined, physically and mentally demanding activity. Respect, both for oneself and others, is paramount. The training is rigorous and regimented. The focus is on control of one's mind and movements. It is not a sport for slackers.

I have since discovered that many unschoolers gravitate toward martial arts. I am not surprised. Unschooling epitomizes self-discipline and self-direction: key qualities of martial arts training.

## **The Rejection of Coercion**

Unschooling may, at first glance, seem like a rejection of formal instruction and rigorous training. The reality is that unschoolers often choose very formal instruction and very rigorous training. The key word, though, is choose. They choose—based on their own interests—what to learn, when, how, and from whom. When they find something they are interested in, unschoolers often immerse themselves in it wholeheartedly. They commit to rigor and regimentation when it matters to them. Choosing to join the military and endure boot camp training is quite different from being drafted. Freedom is the opposite of coercion.

While Molly competed in her first martial arts tournament this weekend, I was struck by its tone and structure. Dozens of students, of all different skill levels, ranging from age six to over 70, competed before an awestruck audience. Sprinkled between their individual performances were master-level demonstrations of the highest skills in eight martial arts. Observing a highly diverse group of people of all ages and stages gathering together in pursuit of a common interest, with only themselves to compete against, was truly inspirational. It's rare to see such intergenerational collaboration and respect.

Unschoolers unapologetically reject coercion, choosing freedom over force in learning and in living. Freedom comes with responsibility. When children are given freedom and opportunity, they will take responsibility for their own education and become astonishingly self-disciplined. They will immerse themselves in meaningful passions and commit to mastery of skills and content with unimaginable enthusiasm and grit.

So, no, we don't give our kids exams. But that does not mean they are not tested.

## **Freedom Plus Responsibility: Why Unschooling Is Nothing Like ‘Lord of the Flies’**

I recently read William Golding’s classic 1954 book, *Lord of the Flies*, to my nine-year-old son, Jack. Unschooling is often cartoonishly characterized by critics as a “Lord of the Flies” environment, where kids run around wildly and chaos ensues. In the story, young boys stranded on a deserted island devolve into tribalism and savagery.

There is an important difference between freedom and chaos. With freedom comes responsibility; without that responsibility, and the fetters it naturally creates, chaos could reign.

### **Freedom in the Absence of Responsibility Is Chaos**

In the book, the absence of adults to model and nurture responsibility is palpably felt. Adults matter to children. They guide, protect, tend, reassure, and mediate. The lack of calm, care, and stability that adults offer children is what ultimately triggers the boys’ downfall. Of course, the great lesson from this great book is that it isn’t just children who would descend into brutality when calm, care, and stability are missing; it’s all of us.

In a happy coincidence, at the same time I was reading to Jack I was also reading Amy Chua’s new book, [\*Political Tribes\*](#). This line from Chua’s book could have easily been from Golding’s: “When groups feel threatened, they retreat into tribalism. They close ranks and become more insular, more defensive, more punitive, more us-versus-them.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Unschooling children are granted great freedom, tempered by great responsibility, and adults play a constant and critical role in providing calm and care, facilitating freedom and responsibility, and connecting interests with available learning resources. As I interviewed unschooling families and visited self-directed [learning centers and unschooling schools](#) across the country while writing my forthcoming book about unschooling, a key theme was the deliberate way in which parents and educators ensure a balance of freedom and responsibility for unschooled children.

In some cases, these expectations are drafted by the children themselves, in community with adults, as part of their school’s philosophy of democratic self-

governance. In other cases, they are established by the adults running the space and agreed to by the young people who attend. Similarly, most unschooling families have explicit or implicit expectations for freedom balanced by responsibility in their own homes and communities. My children have chores and responsibilities, just as we adults do, in contributing to the smooth functioning of our shared home. We also all try to live and learn respectfully with one another and in accordance with our own values.

## **Responsibility and Freedom Go Hand-in-Hand**

The responsibility component of freedom is what enables free people to live peacefully and respectfully within a larger community. It is what prevents the chaos of the lost boys on the island. With the care of adults, unschooling prepares young people to live in a free society by allowing them to experience the ongoing, and sometimes challenging, interplay between freedom and responsibility.

They may have abundant choices and opportunities, but they must also confront the consequences of those choices and the obligations associated with those opportunities. As the 20th-century Nobel prize-winning economist, Friedrich Hayek, [wrote](#) in *The Constitution of Liberty*: “Liberty not only means that the individual has both the opportunity and the burden of choice; it also means that he must bear the consequences. . . Liberty and responsibility are inseparable.”

In *Lord of the Flies*, the fictional troop of boys experiences freedom for the first time, but they haven’t learned about the responsibility that must accompany that freedom. Instead, they import the artificial hierarchy and social customs of their school cliques. As pressures mount, bullying shifts into tribalism, boundary-testing into warfare. *Lord of the Flies* is the opposite of unschooling. It shows the necessity for genuine freedom balanced by genuine responsibility and the important role of adults in providing care and calmness for children.

Freedom, as *Lord of the Flies* so vividly shows, is the easy part. Responsibility is far more difficult to define, demonstrate, and tend to—for unschoolers and for all of us.

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[1] Chua, Amy. 2018. *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*. New York: Penguin Press.

# **There Is No ‘Last Day’ of Unschooling**

When I was a child, I remember counting the days until the end of the school year. Once June hit, I would mark off on the calendar the field trip day to a museum and “field day,” with its tug-of-war and potato sack races. Those days wouldn’t “count” in my total remaining days of the school year because they wouldn’t actually be school days. They would be fun. And I loved school! Yet, today, I wonder: If I loved school so much, why was I always so eager for it to end?

## **The Last Day of School?**

My [Instagram](#) feed fills this time of year with photos announcing the last day of school, for both homeschoolers and conventional schoolers alike. Often, these photos are accompanied by a “first day of school” photo from the fall, showing the beginning and the end. I get it. Childhood moves so quickly that we crave tangible markers of the passage of time, visible measures of growth.

These photos are vivid reminders of how different unschooling is from standard schooling or school-at-home. With unschooling, there is no beginning and end, no start and stop. I can’t even imagine having a “last day of the school year” photo for my kids. What would it look like? The last day of what?

For unschoolers, learning is woven into the continuous, year-round, natural process of living. It is not separated into certain subject silos or reserved for a specified number of hours or days. It is not orchestrated by a linear, sequential curriculum determining how, when, and in what ways a human will learn. It is not pre-determined. It is not forced.

## **Children Don’t Need to Be Forced**

In [How Children Fail](#), John Holt describes how children become conditioned to be taught, to be coerced into learning, to be prodded with bribes and punishments. Children learn that this is what it means to be educated, that others hold the puppet strings. They learn that learning is not within themselves but at the command of others. Holt writes:

This idea that children won’t learn without outside rewards and

penalties, or in the debased jargon of the behaviorists, “positive and negative reinforcements,” usually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we treat children long enough as if that were true, they will come to believe it is true. So many people have said to me, “If we didn’t make children do things, they wouldn’t do anything.” Even worse, they say, “If I weren’t made to do things, I wouldn’t do anything.”

*It is the creed of a slave.* [emphasis in original][1]

My kids read, write, do math, and explore all sorts of topics all year long—not because we tell them to read, write, calculate, and explore, but because they are genuinely excited about learning. They have not been trained otherwise. They read books that they love, ask daily if they can do [Prodigy Math](#) on the computer because it is so much fun, write blog posts or scripts or emails or stories because they decide to do so—not because they are cajoled into it.

They have no reason to think that math is only something one does during certain seasons or as an “enrichment” activity. They can’t imagine a forced writing or reading assignment. They write and read because they want to, because it’s useful and enjoyable. They have no mental model to think that reading, writing, and arithmetic are somehow onerous subjects to be avoided, or only reserved for certain times and places.

## **Children Will Pursue What They Enjoy**

My 11-year-old daughter has been taking a rigorous fiction writing class through [Outschool.com](#), an online learning platform for kids. The class is taught by an award-winning fiction writer and incorporates live group discussions with her classmates around the world and ongoing writing expectations and feedback. It is quite a commitment, but it is something that she is passionate about, that she is driving.

As an unschooling parent, I connected her to Outschool as a possible resource, as well as other local writing classes, and she found that this online class was the best fit for her writing goals. She writes all the time, enthusiastically prepares for her class, and connects with many of her classmates around the globe through Google Hangouts. She also knows that if this course no longer meets her needs, she can leave. So far, she has no interest in leaving and

signed on for a three-month summer extension of the course. I found it interesting that some of her other summer classmates are homeschoolers.

Non-coercive, self-directed, interest-driven, adult-facilitated learning has no first day and last day. Unschooling is interconnected with daily life, and authentic learning isn't tied to an arbitrary calendar. There is no ending my children are anticipating this month. If there was something they didn't want to be doing, they wouldn't be doing it.

Summertime rhythms will be similar to springtime ones. They will continue to play with friends and pursue passions. Tomorrow will look much like yesterday and next week. We'll do just as much swimming in September as we do in June. Reading, writing, arithmetic—and so much more—will be explored, freely and joyfully. Photos or not.

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[1] Holt, John. 1995. *How Children Fail*. New York: Perseus Books.

# Why Unschoolers Grow Up to Be Entrepreneurs

Almost by definition, entrepreneurs are creative thinkers and experimental doers. They reject the status quo and devise new approaches and better inventions. They are risk-takers and dreamers, valuing ingenuity over convention. They get things done.

It shouldn't be surprising to learn that many unschoolers become entrepreneurs. Able to grow up free from a coercive classroom or traditional school-at-home environment, unschoolers nurture interests and passions that may sprout into full-fledged careers. Their creativity and curiosity remain intact, uncorrupted by a mass education system intent on order and conformity. Their energy and exuberance, while a liability in school, are supported with unschooling, fostering the stamina necessary to successfully bring a business idea to market. Like entrepreneurship, unschooling challenges what is for what could be.

It shouldn't be surprising to learn that many unschoolers become entrepreneurs.

The numbers are startling. In a survey of grown unschoolers, Boston College professor Peter Gray, along with his colleague Gina Riley, [discovered](#) that more than half of the grown unschoolers they interviewed were presently working as entrepreneurs. Many of the respondents indicated that their careers were directly linked to childhood interests that they followed into adulthood. Interestingly, the correlation between unschooling and entrepreneurship was the highest for the always-unschooled group, as compared to intermittent unschoolers.

## Unschoolers Make Amazing Entrepreneurs

Anecdotally, the link between unschooling and entrepreneurship is fascinating. Karen Leong is a 19-year-old custom cake designer with her own flourishing [small business](#). Unschooled throughout her childhood, she learned about cake design from watching YouTube videos when she was 11. That triggered a sprouting interest, and she pursued additional, months-long courses in cake design and pastry work. Today, her business is expanding and she credits unschooling for playing a large role in her current entrepreneurial pursuits. In a recent interview for *New Straits Times*, she [says](#) about her upbringing: "My



parents were very involved in my unschooling. It's essential that parents are very proactive in their child's unschooling journey, maintain open communications and have a strong relationship with their child.”[1]

Another grown unschooled entrepreneur is New Jersey contractor, Zachary Dettmore. In a [recent interview](#) with the *Lyndhurst Daily Voice*, Dettmore describes how growing up unschooled enabled him to pursue his interests, including his passion for building and construction that emerged when he was around eight-years-old. According to the article: “I was always interested in building and how things worked,” he said, “so my reading as a child was geared towards non-fiction topics that interested me. I wasn't pigeonholed into a one-size-fits-all education methodology.”[2] At 13, he took a timber-framing course and became increasingly committed to a career as a contractor. Now 29, Dettmore runs a successful [custom contracting business](#) with a couple of employees.

## **Entrepreneurship Is at the Heart of Unschooling**

Successful entrepreneurs are self-starters, driven by their own passions and goals to create something new and different that has value to others. As self-directed learners, unschoolers are given the freedom early on to discover these passions and commit to these individual goals. They are allowed the time and space to explore, to tinker. Whether with their family, or while attending a self-directed [learning center or unschooling school](#), unschooled children are surrounded by supportive adults eager to help connect their budding interests with the larger resources of their community, like classes and mentors. This process of pursuing individual passions while being supported by caring adults creates the ideal conditions for aspiring entrepreneurs to imagine new possibilities and leap into unknown enterprises.

As the American entrepreneur and author, Jim Rohn, once [said](#): “Formal education will make you a living; self-education will make you a fortune.”[3] While all of us can benefit from his advice, unschoolers have a great head start.

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[1] Yeoh, Oon. 2018. “The ‘unschooled’ Cake Designer.” *New Straits Times*. <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/pulse/2018/01/329262/unschooled-cake-designer>

[2] Levine, Cecilia. 2018. “Unschooled Lyndhurst Contractor Busts Blue-Collar

Stereotype: Have No Shame.” *Lyndhurst Daily Voice*.  
<http://lyndhurst.dailyvoice.com/business/unschooled-lyndhurst-contractor-busts-blue-collar-stereotype-have-no-shame/736557/>

[3] Rampton, John. 2016. “20 Quotes From Jim Rohn Putting Success and Life into Perspective.” *Entrepreneur*. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/271873>

# **Frequently Raised Objections**

## Don't Children Need School?

**OBJECTION: Homeschooling seems fairly straightforward. Parents act as their children's teachers, imparting a chosen curriculum and evaluating progress appropriately. What is unschooling?**

RESPONSE: Over the last few decades since it became legally-recognized in all 50 U.S. states in 1993, homeschooling has become a widely-accepted method of education in which parents assume responsibility for educating their children at home and throughout their community. There are currently over two million homeschoolers in the U.S., and a percentage of them (estimates range [from 10% to up to 50%](#)) identify as “uschoolers,” or families who avoid replicating school-at-home and instead embrace the philosophy of Self-Directed Education.

Unlike traditional homeschooling, in which the accoutrements of standard schooling (e.g., top-down instruction, packaged curriculum, and standard assessment tools) remain intact, unschooling rejects the very idea of schooling. Instead, unschooling parents allow their children's emerging interests to guide their learning, and provide the support and resources to facilitate natural, non-coercive education.

**OBJECTION: The idea of non-coercive learning resonates with me--and I see the value of allowing children to explore their own interests--but what about “the basics”? Left to their own devices, wouldn't kids just do fun and games and never buckle down to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic?**

RESPONSE: Unschooling acknowledges that humans are learning creatures. From infancy, children exhibit an insatiable drive to explore and understand their world. We don't overtly teach children how to roll, crawl, walk, and talk; yet, most children learn all of this, on their own, as they observe and imitate the world around them.

As Boston College psychology professor, and unschooling advocate, Dr. Peter Gray [explains](#):

Through their own efforts, children learn to walk, run, jump and climb. They learn from scratch their native language, and with that, they learn to assert their will, argue, amuse, annoy,

befriend, charm and ask questions. Through questioning and exploring, they acquire an enormous amount of knowledge about the physical and social world around them, and in their play, they practice skills that promote their physical, intellectual, social and emotional development. They do all this before anyone, in any systematic way, tries to teach them anything. This amazing drive and capacity to learn does not turn itself off when children turn 5 or 6. We turn it off with our coercive system of schooling.

You may be surprised that many children who do not go to school retain their capacity and drive for natural learning. Their curiosity guides them to discover new interests and understand new content. Unschooled children, when properly supported by their family and community, teach themselves to read when given the freedom to read material that is personally meaningful. With the help of supportive adults, children learn to read on a widely variable timetable with an average age of reading proficiency (defined as reading anything with ease) at around age 8 ½. They learn writing—not by doing writing lessons and being told what, when, and how to write—but by being surrounded by literacy and given the opportunity to write in authentic, purposeful ways. They learn arithmetic by being exposed to mathematical principles in the course of everyday living, when they are surrounded by numeracy, by opportunities to play with mathematical principles (such as by reading mathematical children's books, through online math games, and video games), and by being encouraged to engage with mathematical concepts through daily commerce, banking, cooking, and so on. When children are given access to the tools of their society, they will learn how to use the tools effectively when appropriately supported and encouraged.

**OBJECTION: This sounds like a lot of work for the parents. For some families, homeschooling and unschooling are simply not viable education options. Some parents are just incapable or incompetent. That's what schooling is for.**

**RESPONSE:** It is true that homeschooling and unschooling require adult support. Adults provide the time, space, opportunity, and resources that enable unschooled children to learn, grow, and thrive. Often, unschooling parents are the ones creating this space for their own children, but increasingly independent

self-directed learning centers and “unschooling schools” are sprouting to support unschooling families.

Self-directed learning centers are community-based resource centers that reflect the unschooling ideals of non-coercive, interest-driven education. Parents typically register as homeschoolers, providing the legal designation necessary to opt-out of compulsory schooling, and then enroll their children in a self-directed learning center on either a part-time or full-time basis, up to five days a week. “Unschooling schools,” like Sudbury-style schools and certain democratic free schools, are full-time licensed private schools that embrace unschooling principles. There are no required classes, no curriculum, no exams or evaluation. Children interact with peers of all ages, spending their time on activities and efforts that matter to them, with adults available for help and support. Two of the most famous self-directed schools are Summerhill, founded in England in 1921 and still in operation today; and the Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts, founded in 1968. It recently celebrated its 50-year anniversary and has inspired the formation of dozens of other Sudbury-style schools around the world.

**OBJECTION: I wonder about the consequences of all this freedom. How do kids learn how to buckle down and do things they may not always like? What are the outcomes of unschoolers? Wouldn't they flounder in adulthood?**

RESPONSE: Unlike conventional schooling that often serves a preparatory function, unschooling views living and learning as inseparable. As the renowned education philosopher John Dewey wrote in *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897): “I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.” Unschoolers view education as a process of living, and learning as something that happens naturally, and deeply, when it is non-coercive and tied to individual passions.

While research on grown unschoolers is limited, [studies](#) have shown that they do quite well in adulthood. Despite not having a high school diploma, unschoolers frequently get accepted into the colleges of their choice and successfully pursue a wide variety of degrees and occupations. This research is consistent with [research](#) on Sudbury Valley School graduates, revealing successful paths to college and career, along with fulfilling adult lives tied to individual passions--that often sprouted during childhood and adolescence.

Humans thrive in freedom. Children are no different.

### **Additional resources:**

[Parents Can Trust Kids To Teach Themselves](#)

[4 Ways Kids Are Biologically Driven to Self-Educate](#)

[Kids Thrive Under Self-Directed Education](#)

[Kids Don't Need to Be "Well-Rounded." They Need to Be Passionate.](#)

[The Many Facets of Freedom](#)

[Purpose-Driven Learning Is the Only Kind that Lasts](#)

## Won't Kids Just Use Their Freedom to Goof Off?

When Thomas Edison was eight years old, he attended school for the first time. It was 1855, and compulsory schooling statutes were only just beginning to emerge in the United States. After 12 weeks of school, Edison's teacher called him "addled," or unable to think clearly. Edison's mother Nancy disagreed with the teacher, suggesting the teacher's harsh manner and incessant focus on rote memorization and recitation were incompatible with the way her young son naturally learned. Frustrated by the teacher's rigidity and austerity, Nancy pulled her son from school and homeschooled him from then on.

Nancy Edison's approach to homeschooling young Tom was mostly self-directed, allowing Tom great freedom to steer his own learning. She ensured that he had a basic understanding of reading, writing, and arithmetic--and she read to him often--but he was mostly free to follow his own interests and pursue his own passions. Edison adored books and by the time he was 12 had read many of the classics out of his own interest and curiosity. He became absorbed by science, so his mother bought him a book on the physical sciences and he performed every experiment it contained.

His passion for chemistry grew, so his mother surrounded him with more books connected to his interests. Edison himself spent all his spare money to buy chemicals from a local pharmacist to conduct experiments in his home's basement when he was still just a tween.

With over 1,000 patents, Edison became one of the greatest inventors of all time. In his famous New Jersey lab, one of his chemists would later [remark](#): "Had Edison been formally schooled, he might not have had the audacity to create such impossible things." Like most people, Edison thrived with freedom and autonomy and the opportunity to direct his own education, linked to his own interests.

**OBJECTION:** Yes, but that was Thomas Edison, clearly a genius. Most typical children today would just goof off if they were granted the same freedom. Look at kids these days. When they are out of school, what do they do with their time? They play video games and share photos on Snapchat. Let's just say most kids when given freedom wouldn't be doing science experiments in their basements.



RESPONSE: It's true, many kids these days spend their free time playing video games, texting friends, and otherwise engaging with their smartphones. In their book, *Screen Schooled*, public school teachers Joe Clement and Matt Miles describe this phenomenon in detail. They explain the ways in which young people are absorbed by technology and social media and claim that this is harming their intellect and their drive.

The glaring issue with this claim, however, is that it describes the behavior of schooled kids. Yes, for kids who attend school, technology and social media may be a life raft of freedom in a sea of compulsion. Texting with their friends or playing video games may be the only moments schoolchildren have for real connection and control in an era when increasingly restrictive, test-driven schooling consumes more of their time than ever before, and unstructured childhood play has largely disappeared.

For young children ages six to eight, schooling [increased](#) from an average of five hours a day in 1981-82, to an average of seven hours a day in 2002-03. And for today's teens, schooling consumes much more of their time than previous generations, often driven by the illusion of enrichment and "getting ahead". According to [data](#) from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 42 percent of teens were enrolled in school during July 2016, compared to only 10 percent enrolled in July 1985.

**OBJECTION: Even kids who are homeschooled or unschooled often spend a lot of time playing Minecraft or other video games. This isn't just about school. Children, and some adults, don't have the self-control and discipline to engage in rigorous, meaningful activities without imposed structure and order.**

RESPONSE: There are two points here. The first point argues that video games or similar actions are examples of "goofing off" and therefore not valuable for children. Much compelling [research](#) shows that children learn best through self-directed, unstructured play. As childhood free play has declined dramatically over the past few decades, young people seem to be compensating by playing more video games. Not allowed to play outside unsupervised out of safety fears, or increasingly corralled in adult-led structured activities, children may find video games to be an important outlet for modern free play. News headlines often make it seem like this is a dangerous trend, lamenting the amount of time young people may spend online; but research doesn't affirm these claims. As

Boston College psychology professor, Dr. Peter Gray, [writes](#) in his *Psychology Today* blog:

For the most part, children can no longer go outdoors and find others to play with, freely, away from adults, as they once did; but many of them can and do go onto computers and play video games. Over time, these games have become increasingly varied, complex, creative, and social. This is especially true with the increasing popularity of multi-player online games. If you believe the scare articles in the media, you might believe that the rise of video gaming is a cause of declines in psychological health, but, as I have suggested elsewhere (e.g. [here](#)), the opposite may be true. Video gaming may in fact be an ameliorating factor, helping to counteract the harmful effects of the loss of other forms of play.

The second point is the claim that if children, or adults, are granted true freedom then they will not engage in rigorous, purposeful activities; they will “goof off” without imposed structure because work is hard and challenges are difficult and our human tendency is to avoid hard work and challenges, or so the thinking goes. Sadly, this is a symptom of a schooled mindset. Before they go to school, young children are remarkably eager, competent, and committed learners. It is not until they go to school that they begin to associate learning as something undesirable. Yet, it is forced schooling, not learning, that is undesirable. Learning and schooling become entangled making the former seem as unappealing as the latter. Without coercive schooling, learning retains its inherent appeal.

When children are granted the freedom to direct their own education—not a teacher or a parent or someone else deciding what they must learn and do—they will take their own self-education very seriously and tackle it with great enthusiasm. For children who have never been schooled, this tendency toward self-education remains intact; for young people who leave school for unschooling, a transitional “deschooling” process may ensue in which a child reconnects with his innate love of learning. As John Holt writes in *Teach Your Own*: “In short, if we give children enough time, as free as possible from destructive outside pressures, the chances are good that they will once again find within themselves their reasons for doing worthwhile things.”[\[1\]](#)

This seems hard to believe. I still don't think children would willingly engage with difficult subjects or challenge themselves to work hard in the absence of external pressures and expectations.

It does seem hard to believe, but unschooled children consistently show that they engage in rigorous work and undertake challenging initiatives when they are free to follow their own interests and are supported by caring adults and community resources. For example, [Karen Leong](#) is a lifelong unschooler who became interested in cake design from a YouTube video that she watched when she was 11. This led to a growing interest in the topic, including taking courses and perfecting her craft. Today, she is 19 and runs a successful commercial cake design business. As a teenager, she was interested in other topics as well, such as medicine and psychology, and pursued studies in these fields on her own. She thought seriously about pursuing these subjects at the university level, but her cake design business took off, turning a profit by the third month. Unschoolers like Karen show that ongoing learning is something most of us crave; it's schooling that can lead to an aversion toward learning.

“Goofing off” is generally what we do if we feel that we don't have control over our lives and of our destiny, and when we have become conditioned to believe that learning is drudgery to be avoided. For children and adults who are free to live and learn without coercion while following individual passions, they are too busy to goof off.

### **Additional Resources:**

[Parents Can Trust Kids To Teach Themselves](#)

[We Don't Give Our Kids Exams. But That Does Not Mean They Are Not Tested.](#)

[How School Stole Your Flow](#)

[The Learner Precedes The Teacher](#)

[My Kid Learned More from Mario Maker than I Did from a Marketing Major](#)

[The Most Schooled Generation in History is Miserable](#)

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[1] Holt, John, and Farenga, Patrick. *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book of Homeschooling*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2003, p. 99.

## **Don't Kids Need to Be Forced to Learn “the Basics”?**

***Objection:*** We must have an educated citizenry. There are certain things children must know in order to be well-educated in a free society. While it makes sense to want to grant children more freedom in their learning, we have to be realistic. Children wouldn't willingly learn to read, write, and do math without adult prodding. Some subjects need to be forced on children for their own good--and for society's.

Education is indeed important. Citizens of a free society should be literate and numerate, but imparting this knowledge through force may not be the best way to raise free, educated citizens.

Most of us went to school. There, we were forced to study reading, writing, and arithmetic. We were cajoled with gold stickers, punished or publicly corrected, and conspicuously grouped with others of similar academic ability. We knew where we stood and we conformed to the expectations of the teacher and the school. Learning and schooling became synonymous in our minds, but they aren't.

Far from it, as educator and author, John Holt, wrote in [\*How Children Learn\*](#): “We like to say that we send children to school to teach them to think. What we do, all too often, is to teach them to think badly, to give up a natural and powerful way of thinking in favor of a method that does not work well for them and that we rarely use ourselves.”

In the coercive environment of school, young people must follow an ordained curriculum that must be administered by a trained teacher who receives her orders from administrators who receive their orders from further up the institutional hierarchy. This schooled learning is familiar. It has operated in the same way, with the same expectations and outcomes, for well over a century since compulsory mass schooling first became law throughout the U.S. and the world. It can be difficult to imagine learning without schooling, but schooling can actually hamper more learning than it fosters.

**OBJECTION:** But what would learning without schooling look like? How could children possibly learn “the basics” without being systematically taught?

RESPONSE: Schooled learning is one type of education, but it is not the only one. There are other ways to educate successfully without relying on force. Back in 1921, A.S. Neill founded the [Summerhill School](#) in England, a fully self-directed school built around the principles of non-coercion and democratic self-governance. All members of the school community vote equally on policies and expectations, and while conventional classes are offered, attendance is never compulsory. Nearing its centennial celebration, Summerhill has graduated many students who not only learned “the basics,” but also advanced academic content without coercion.

Similar to Summerhill, the [Sudbury Valley School](#) in Massachusetts is nearing its 50-year anniversary. A fully democratic, self-governing independent school for kids aged 4-18, Sudbury Valley was founded by a former Columbia University physics professor. Over the last half-century, the school has conducted extensive [research](#) on its graduates. At Sudbury Valley, there are no required classes, no grades, no assessment of any kind. If young people are interested in a class or tutorial, they take the initiative to ask the facilitators to assist in creating one. No child has ever been forced to read, write, or do math; yet, Sudbury Valley School students learn and flourish. They learn the “basics,” and much more, because they are given freedom and are surrounded by literacy and numeracy, supportive adults, and active peers.

Dan Greenberg, the founder of Sudbury Valley School, writes in his book [Free At Last](#) that every child has learned to read, albeit on wildly different time frames, without ever being forced. He also contends, having observed decades of students, that it takes about 20 total hours for a student to learn the entire elementary school math curriculum when he/she is motivated to learn it. Twenty hours. And, believe it or not, young people will ask to learn these “basics” when it is not forced and when it is important to them, on their own timetable.

Boston College psychology professor, Peter Gray, has studied the Sudbury Valley School extensively, including publishing academic journal articles confirming positive results for its alumni. Gray [writes](#) about Sudbury Valley: “Graduates of Sudbury Valley can be found today in the whole range of careers that are valued by our society. They are skilled craftsmen, entrepreneurs, artists, musicians, scientists, social workers, nurses, doctors, and so on. Those who chose to pursue higher education had no particular difficulties getting into colleges and universities, including highly selective ones, or performing well there once admitted. Many others have become successful in careers without going to college. More important, former students report that they are happy

with their lives.”

Intrigued by his findings on Sudbury Valley School graduates, Gray conducted additional research on the lives and outcomes of “unschoolers,” or homeschooled children who learn without curriculum and other school-like methods in a manner similar to students at Sudbury Valley and its modern offshoots. He [found](#) similar results, revealing that unschooled children are able to easily learn “the basics,” as well as advanced academics, when they are surrounded by freedom, opportunity, and supportive adults.

**OBJECTION: Students who attend these private democratic schools, or who are unschooled, likely come from relatively well-off households with educated parents. They would learn “the basics” no matter what. Children from poor and disadvantaged homes probably wouldn’t be able to learn this way.**

RESPONSE: Interestingly, research shows that this simply isn’t true. Sugata Mitra, professor at Newcastle University in England, has conducted numerous experiments over the past two decades that reveal the incredible power of children--even very poor children--to learn deeply and naturally, without coercion, when they are given freedom, opportunity, and support. Beginning in 1999, Mitra conducted his first “hole in the wall” experiment in India in which he placed a computer with an Internet connection on the outside wall of his office in the heart of the New Delhi slums. Curious about this machine, groups of children mostly aged 6-13, and who were very poor and mostly illiterate, began playing with the computer. Over the ensuing weeks, they learned how to navigate the computer, search the Web, download and use various programs. They learned many English words and taught each other, all in the spirit of play and discovery. They all became computer literate within a 3-month period, and used the computer to learn to read or deepen their native literacy skills.

Stunned by these results, Mitra replicated his experiment in urban slum and rural poor areas throughout India and elsewhere with the same results. He created control groups with similarly situated students learning computer content from a teacher in a traditional classroom, and found that the self-taught students had comparable proficiency. He expanded his experiments over the years to reveal the surprising degree of knowledge children could attain, when given freedom, opportunity, and support. Mitra discusses many of these findings in his [award-winning 2013 TED Talk](#).

Mitra's experiments show not only the amazing capacity of all children to learn and to learn complex content, they also highlight the incredible power of technology to facilitate self-directed learning throughout the world.

In an age of ubiquitous and affordable technology, and the access to knowledge and information that computers and the Internet enable, the static classroom and top-down instructional model may be growing increasingly obsolete. Innovation is democratizing learning, supporting more children and adults in non-coercive, self-directed education.

Humans are natural learners. These innate learning tendencies do not disappear as we grow, but they are often dulled by coercive schooling where we are trained to be taught. In today's networked world, the ability to learn "the basics" and so much more has never been easier or more effective.

### **Additional Resources:**

[How Learning Blossoms in a School Without Schooling](#)

[Parents Can Trust Kids To Teach Themselves](#)

[What Happens When You Ask Unschoolers What They Want to Be When They Grow Up](#)

[The Most Basic Freedom is the Freedom To Quit](#)

[This is What Will Replace K-12 Schools and College](#)

## Isn't the Real Problem with Schooling Insufficient Spending?

**OBJECTION:** If only American schools were better-funded, then student achievement and academic outcomes would soar. It's a money problem. We're not investing enough in our public schools and students are suffering.

RESPONSE: It might seem plausible that lack of adequate funding is what plagues America's public schools. After all, we see headlines of multi-day teacher strikes demanding salary raises and lamenting [pension problems](#). And The New York Times [describes](#) vividly the poor quality of public schooling infrastructure and supplies.

Digging more deeply into the numbers, though, reveals that lack of money may not be the culprit. American taxpayers [spend](#) \$634 billion every year for K-12 public schooling. That works out to over \$12,000 per student spent annually. In fact, the U.S. [spends more on education](#) than most other developed nations, and our public school spending has increased dramatically over the past half-century.

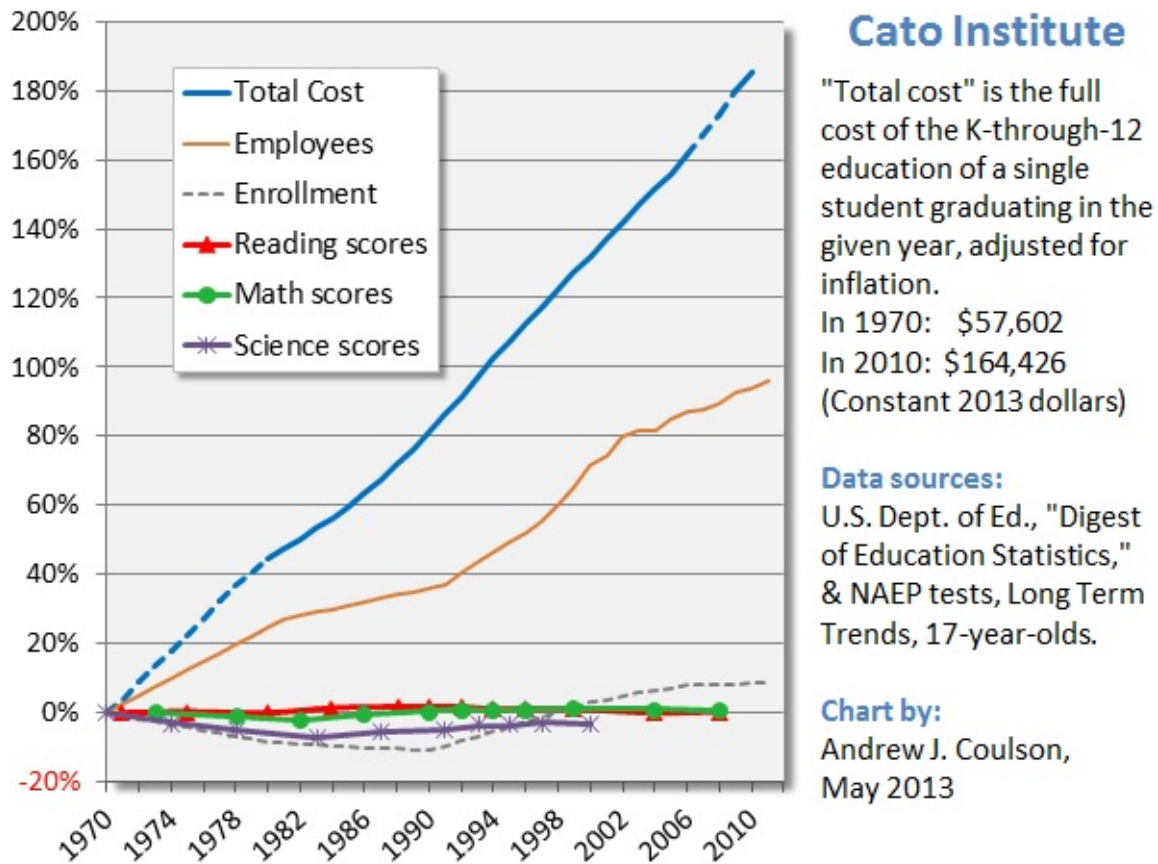
According to [data](#) from the National Center for Education Statistics, since the Second World War, U.S. education spending, adjusted for inflation, rose 663 percent! Much of this increased spending went to hire teachers and staff. Between 1950 and 2009, staff hiring increased four times as much as student enrollment.

**OBJECTION:** Maybe hiring more teachers and support staff was a good thing. Maybe students are learning more because of it.

RESPONSE: As the chart below from the [Cato Institute](#) shows, despite massive funding increases for public schooling and more staff hirings, student academic performance remains flat:



# Trends in American Public Schooling Since 1970



For all this investment, public schooling academic outcomes are mediocre at best. The results of the [2017 National Assessment of Education Progress \(NAEP\)](#), also known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” show stagnant scores in reading and math, and a widening gap between poorer-performing students and higher-performing ones. Only 35 percent of the nation’s eighth graders are scoring at or above the ‘Proficient’ level in reading, and only 34 percent of eighth graders are proficient in math.

On international comparison tests, such as the highly-respected Program for International Student Assessment, U.S. students are [falling behind](#) their peers in other nations, with U.S. 15-year-olds ranking 38th out of 71 countries in math and 24th in science.

**OBJECTION:** Although more teachers and staff have been hired for public schools, they may not be adequately compensated. Maybe we’re not getting the best teachers because we need to pay them better. Teachers work so hard and their role in society is so important, they should be paid like

**doctors. If they were, student performance would improve.**

RESPONSE: The vocal uprisings by teachers unions, and the sincere good will we have toward the teaching profession, cause us to sympathize when teachers claim they are underpaid. But again, the numbers simply don't add up. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) [compared](#) teacher salaries to other professions and found that teachers are being paid "market-level wages." When adding in teachers' generous retirement benefits, their overall compensation package is dramatically higher than private-sector employees. Most public school teachers receive pensions with generous retirement healthcare coverage, something unavailable for most private-sector jobs. This pension and healthcare burden is sapping school districts dry.

The AEI researchers analyzed Bureau of Labor Statistics data and found that "public school teachers on average receive salaries about 8 percent above similar private-sector jobs." Salaries in any industry are determined by the supply and demand of the workers' skills and talents. According to the AEI [article](#), when teachers switched to non-teaching jobs, their wages actually declined.

**OBJECTION: We really should be allocating more money to our inner-city schools who educate large populations of underprivileged youth. Students there are struggling the most and could benefit greatly from more resources and support.**

RESPONSE: We are right to focus on ways to provide educational opportunity to all children, and we should be particularly concerned about helping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have equal educational opportunity. More money may not be the answer, however. Recent government efforts to channel more funding and resources to inner-city public schools showed disappointing results.

As [reported](#) by The Washington Post, U.S. Department of Education [data](#) released in early 2017 by the outgoing Obama administration revealed that despite funneling billions of federal dollars into failing inner-city schools through direct School Improvement Grants, there was no difference in test scores, graduation rates, or college enrollment between the schools that received the grants and those that did not. This education policy initiative, according to the Post [article](#), was "the largest federal investment ever targeted to failing schools," sending \$7 billion of taxpayer money into the program between 2010

and 2015.

**OBJECTION: If not more money, what might help to improve education outcomes?**

RESPONSE: Instead of more money, provide more choice. Parents should be able to choose from a variety of education options for their children, rather than be forced into mandatory compulsory schooling.

### **Education vs. Schooling**

Compulsory public schooling is a relatively recent societal idea. The first American compulsory schooling statute was passed in Massachusetts in 1852, mandating school attendance for children ages 8-14 as well as mandating taxpayer funding for these “common schools.” Prior to this law, there was a wide assortment of education options for parents to choose from, including public schools, private schools, charity schools, church schools, homeschooling, and apprenticeship programs. Compulsory schooling laws limited parental choice, particularly for more disadvantaged families, who often had no other option than to send their child to the new common schools. More privileged families, like Horace Mann, the proclaimed “father of American public education” who was instrumental in passing the 1852 law, continued to homeschool his own children with no intention of sending them to the common schools he mandated for others.

Prior to the 1852 compulsory schooling law, Massachusetts and other states had broad “compulsory education” laws. These laws acknowledged a societal interest in an educated citizenry, but did not specify--or mandate to parents--any particular mode of education. Families were free to choose from an assortment of education options, and the state had limited power over a parent’s education choices. Disentangling schooling from education, while loosening compulsory schooling statutes, could expand education opportunities for children and empower parents to find the best educational setting for their child.

**OBJECTION: But parents can already opt-out of compulsory schooling by homeschooling their kids.**

RESPONSE: Limiting the state’s role in education would free up more parents to homeschool their children as they choose. While homeschooling has been

legally recognized in all 50 U.S. states since 1993, many states highly regulate homeschoolers, often subjecting homeschooled children to statewide homeschooling approval regulations, standardized testing, curriculum requirements, and government oversight. These regulations can be challenging for homeschooling parents. Increasingly, parents are choosing the homeschooling path out of frustration over the heightened focus on national curriculum frameworks and regular standardized testing. Homeschooling parents often opt-out of conventional schooling for the freedom and flexibility to tailor education to the unique needs of their child. Limiting state control over homeschooling can encourage more parents to choose this option, as well as free them to be more innovative in customizing their education approach to fit their child's needs and interests.

## **Unschooling**

Unschooling, or Self-Directed Education, is a form of homeschooling that is gaining in popularity and influence. No exact numbers exist, but estimates suggest that between 10 percent and 50 percent of homeschooling families embrace the unschooling philosophy. Most simply, unschooling rejects the idea that schooling (including school-at-home homeschooling) is the most effective way to be educated. Instead, unschoolers learn throughout their everyday living, by following their interests, pursuing their passions, and being surrounded by ample community resources and supportive adults. Most unschoolers learn at home and throughout their community, but an increasing number of entrepreneurs are creating self-directed learning centers and unschooling schools with flexible attendance options that make this education choice more accessible to more families. Limiting government control over unschooling parents, as well as preventing heightened regulation of unschooling schools and centers, can ensure that education innovation is supported and nurtured.

**OBJECTION: What about for families who can't homeschool or unschool? What education options do they have?**

**RESPONSE:** Unless parents can afford to pay for a private or parochial school, or choose homeschooling/unschooling, their education choices are limited. Most often, their only option is to send their child to an assigned district school, or maybe attend a public charter school if one is available to them and if they are

lucky enough to win a spot in the often-competitive charter school lottery system. While allowing for slightly more education innovation than traditional district schools, charter schools still operate as public schools and often replicate traditional school curriculum and assessment procedures.

For parents who want real education choice, they need a personal piece of the education spending pie. That is, they need access to some (or all) of their tax money that currently pays for the public school that they choose not to use. Vouchers are one education choice mechanism that allows families to allocate a share of public funds toward private education options. Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) and tax credits are other choice options that, if scaled, could re-empower parents and encourage education entrepreneurship. ESAs, in particular, have advantages over vouchers in allowing parents to allocate some of their school tax contribution to a government-approved savings account. This account can then be used for education expenses, including private school tuition, but also toward other education options such as tutoring and materials, online courses, and college tuition. As Corey DeAngelis [explains](#): “Education and schooling are not the same thing. While vouchers allow for private school choice, ESAs allow for educational choice.”

**OBJECTION: Is there any hope for parents stuck with sending their child to an assigned district school? Are there any good efforts to improve conventional schooling?**

RESPONSE: While providing parents with a variety of education choices for their children is the preferred goal, some promising efforts are underway to make schooling less restrictive. Increasingly, parents are opting-out of high-stakes standardized testing for their children. They are pushing back on national curriculum frameworks and advocating for greater local control over their schools. And they are striving to bring back childhood play--particularly for younger children who are increasingly forced, through curriculum and testing, to achieve academic benchmarks at disturbingly early ages. For instance, [research](#) by assistant professor of education, Daphna Bassok, and her colleagues at the University of Virginia found that in 1998, 31% of teachers believed that children should learn to read while in kindergarten. In 2010, that number was 80%.

Various initiatives aim to reinject play into children’s increasingly regimented young lives. The [Let Grow Project](#), for example, works with public schools to offer increased opportunities for free, unstructured, child-directed play

before and after school. These efforts grant children more freedom and autonomy within an otherwise programmed school day. Parents can work together to launch a Let Grow initiative at their child's local school.

More money for public schools may not be the answer. More choice and more freedom could lead to improved education outcomes for all children.

## **Additional Resources**

[The Failure of Public Schooling in One Chart](#)

[No, Teachers Are Not Underpaid](#)

[Public Schools Were Designed to Indoctrinate Immigrants](#)

[What's My Alternative to Big Government? How About Giving Freedom a Chance?](#)

[This is What Will Replace K-12 Schools and Colleges](#)

[Schooling Was For the Industrial Era, Unschooling Is For the Future](#)

[Public School Was the Worst--Luckily I Had Options](#)

[This Kind of School Choice is Superior to Vouchers](#)

## **Don't we need schools to address childhood mental health issues?**

**OBJECTION:** In light of recent school shootings, schools and society should be doing a much better job of addressing the growing mental health issues of today's youth.

RESPONSE: Mass shootings are disturbing, and when they target children it adds to their horror. The rising incidence of children's mental illness is also troubling and should be addressed. But it's possible that these issues are related to the rising grip of compulsory mass schooling. More restrictive schooling could be leading to more psychological turmoil in children. Of all the school shootings that occurred between 2000 and 2018, [94% took place at a public school](#).

Children and adolescents are spending more time in restrictive, test-driven compulsory schooling environments than ever before. For young children ages six to eight, schooling [increased](#) from an average of five hours a day in 1981-82 to an average of seven hours a day in 2002-03. And for today's teens, schooling consumes much more of their time than it did for previous generations, seeping into summertime and other historically school-free periods. According to [data](#) from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 42 percent of teens were enrolled in school during July 2016, compared to only 10 percent enrolled in July 1985.

In the case of teens, spending more time in school and school-like activities may be further separating them from the actual real world in which they previously came of age. As Business Insider [reports](#): "Almost 60% of teens in 1979 had a job, compared to 34% in 2015." Spending more time in the contrived reality of forced schooling and less time in authentic, multi-age, productive communities may be taking its toll on today's youth.

**OBJECTION:** Just because young people are spending more time in school doesn't mean that school is causing them psychological harm. They may be completely unrelated.

RESPONSE: It's possible that rising time in coercive schooling, and the corresponding decline in free, unstructured childhood play and genuine work, may have nothing to do with rising rates of youth mental illness, but the

correlation is striking. New [findings](#) from researchers at Vanderbilt University show a startling connection between time in school and suicidal thoughts and attempts by young people, which have been increasing over the past decade. Whereas most adults see suicide spikes in July and August, most kids see suicide dips in summer. Children's suicidal tendencies appear strongest during the school year.

Boston College psychology professor Dr. Peter Gray encounters similar findings in [his research](#), discovering that children's mental health crises fall during the summer months and accelerate during the school year. Gray believes that increasingly oppressive schooling is leading to serious psychological damage in some children. He [writes](#) on his blog at Psychology Today:

Children now often spend more time at school and at homework than their parents spend at their full-time jobs, and the work of schooling is often more burdensome and stress-inducing than that of a typical adult job. A century ago we came to the conclusion that full-time child labor was child abuse, so we outlawed it; but now school is the equivalent of full-time child labor. The increased time, tedium, and stress of schooling is bringing many kids to the breaking point or beyond, and more and more people are becoming aware of that. It can no longer be believed that schooling is a benign experience for children. The evidence that it induces pathology is overwhelming.

**OBJECTION: What's the solution, then? Kids have to go to school, so we just need to make it more tolerable.**

RESPONSE: Actually, schooling is optional. While compulsory schooling statutes can limit educational freedom, homeschooling is legal in all 50 states and over two million American children are currently homeschooled. Additionally, homeschooling is increasingly being used as a legal designation that allows for more freedom and flexibility in complying with compulsory schooling statutes. For example, a growing number of self-directed learning centers is expanding nationwide, emphasizing non-coercive learning, freedom, and autonomy. Young people register as homeschoolers in their home state or district, and then take advantage of these learning centers on a part-time or full-time basis, depending on a family's needs and a child's interests. These centers focus on enabling children and adolescents to pursue their own passions and be



supported by a community of peers and helpful adults. Nothing is forced. There are no required classes or grades, and the ability to say no is paramount. Yet, in these self-directed spaces, learning flourishes and school-induced psychopathology is practically non-existent.

George Popham is a former public school teacher who in 2013 founded [Bay State Learning Center](#) (BSLC), a self-directed learning space for tweens and teens just outside of Boston that offers full-time and part-time enrollment options for homeschooling families.

Popham says that many of the young people who attend Bay State never considered homeschooling but were driven to it by mounting anxieties brought on by traditional schooling. He says:

A huge number of the new students who come to us are presenting some kind of anxiety disorder, and we find that almost all of them are significantly improved within weeks of joining BSLC. I get calls from therapists asking what we have done! I think the real story is in what we haven't done. We haven't made all their choices for them, we haven't structured all of their available time, and we haven't coerced them into unnaturally regimented patterns. Everything changes when you take coercion out of the picture. Teenagers are actually quite happy people by nature. If you take them out of an environment that makes them miserable they flourish, and the social communities they share become pleasant, accepting, creative and fun. And, in a positive environment, the natural human desire to learn can flourish, there is no need to force it.

Popham has witnessed transformative changes in the young people who attend Bay State. Mental well-being is restored, learning becomes deep and enjoyable, and graduates go on to successfully pursue college and career. Because they are technically homeschoolers, young people at Bay State are not required by law to attend a school five days a week for a certain number of hours each day. Many teens attend the center part-time for peer connection, adult mentoring, and desired classes. The rest of the week, they often take classes at local community colleges, which welcome young teens, and do volunteer or paid work related to their interests. Other self-directed learning centers around the country operate similarly and experience the comparable results. Released from

the restrictive and artificial fetters of coercive schooling, young people thrive in freedom.

**OBJECTION: It seems like we shouldn't give up on public education. These private alternatives are fine but most kids go to public school, so let's just make that better.**

ANSWER: There is a profound difference between public education and public schooling. Schooling is one form of education but it is not the only one. Education is much broader than schooling. Empowering parents to take charge of their children's education is a key focus of education choice initiatives. In particular, [Education Savings Accounts \(ESAs\)](#) make the distinction between education and schooling and allow parents to allocate a portion of their tax dollars toward general education expenses, which are not limited to conventional schooling the way vouchers are.

Public schooling is a compulsory government institution that separates children from their families and communities for increasingly longer portions of their day and year, and at ever-earlier ages, than ever before. It is inherently coercive: children are mandated by law to spend most of their childhood in an assigned district school, unless a parent or guardian liberates them. Their freedom is strictly limited and their learning is forced.

As Plato [warns](#): "Knowledge which is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind." Not only is forced learning less effective and far less enjoyable than non-coercive learning, it is also likely contributing to unnecessary psychological harm in children. Rather than tweaking a coercive schooling system, exploring and creating alternatives to school that provide young people with freedom, choice, support, and an opportunity to learn in an authentic community while pursuing their individual interests may be a better way to educate, inspire, and heal today's youth.

### **Additional Resources:**

[In the Wake of Mass Shootings, Parents Reconsider Mass Schooling](#)  
[Teen Suicide Rates Spike As Back-To-School Season Begins](#)  
[Is Mass Schooling Behind the Anxiety Epidemic Among Teens?](#)  
[Public Schooling Was the Worst - Luckily I Had Options](#)  
[This Kind of School Choice is Superior to Vouchers](#)

[Should Student Marchers Walk Out of School and Not Come Back?](#)

[Government Is Not the Solution to Educational Inequality](#)

[Weapons of Mass Instruction: A Schoolteacher's Journey Through the Dark](#)

[World of Compulsory Schooling](#)

## About the Author

Kerry McDonald ([@kerry\\_edu](#)) is an education policy writer and unschooling advocate whose articles have appeared in *Forbes*, *Newsweek*, *NPR*, *Education Next*, *Natural Mother Magazine*, and others. She is a frequent FEE.org contributor, writing about the intersection of individual liberty and education freedom. Kerry has a B.A. in Economics from Bowdoin College and an M.Ed. in education policy from Harvard University. She is the author of the forthcoming book, *Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom* (Chicago Review Press). Kerry lives in Cambridge, Mass. with her husband and four never-been-schooled children. Follow her writing at [Whole Family Learning](#).

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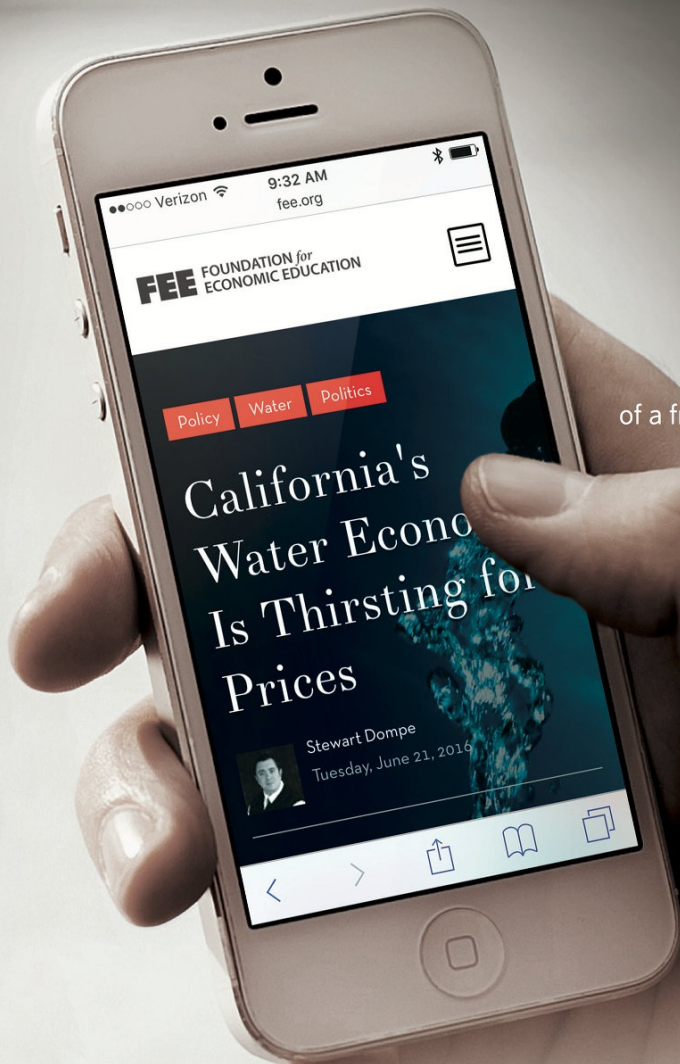
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